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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

GAO XINGJIAN'S THE BUS-STOP:
CHINESE TRADITIONAL THEATRE AND WESTERN AVANT-GARDE

BY

LI, JIANYI

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS.

DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

SPRING, 1991

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ABSTRACT

Gao Xingjian is among the best known and most daring playwrights in China today. This thesis is an overview of his works and ideas, as well as a discussion of his most controversial play The Bus-stop.

Chapter I introduces the playwright, his major works and innovations. Gao Xingjian is employing many Western modern theatrical devices in his experiments, but his aim is to combine theatrical techniques of both the East and the West. Chapter II attempts to provide an overview of the historical development of Chinese theatre. Some unique techniques of traditional Chinese theatre are discussed to indicate their relevance for Gao Xingjian's experiments in modern theatre. Much of Gao Xingjian's inspiration comes from the experiments of Western *avant-garde* dramatists, namely, Artaud, Brecht, Genet and Beckett and the indebtedness is acknowledged in essays by Gao Xingjian. Chapter III shows that Gao's ideas of theatre are closely linked with the theories and practices of these four *avant-garde* playwrights. Finally, Chapter IV discusses the play The Bus-stop. A format of comparative analysis is chosen for discussions of the elements of theme and characters; language and communication; and time and space. The Bus-stop has been compared with Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot because of similarities in content and style. This chapter, however, attempts to show that The Bus-stop is not an imitation of Waiting for Godot, but is a selective adaptation of some of its techniques to express a theme pertinent to the Chinese social context.

Beside showing Gao Xingjian's unique blend of traditional Chinese theatrical forms and elements of Western, mostly French, *avant-garde* theatre, the thesis demonstrates the Chinese author's positive outlook on life, his criticism of particular social problems of contemporary China, and the great intrinsic interest of his major play.

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INTRODUCTION

After thirty years of isolation, when China opened its door to the world in 1978, Chinese writers and readers alike had the opportunity to come in contact with modernist literature. Many forms of modernism were already out of date in the West, but for the Chinese they were Promethean because they brought the fire for new literary creativity. For more than thirty years, socialist realism and the communist party ideologies were the be-all and end-all of literary and artistic creations. In many ways the situation in post-Cultural Revolution China resembled the West after the two World Wars. A sense of spiritual dissolution and crisis became the salient elements of the society. Decay in political orthodoxy and disillusionment with the socialist experimentation left the population in a spiritual quandary. Especially the so-called 'lost-generation,' the generation which had wasted the best times of their lives in ten years of chaotic revolution and without proper schooling and trade skills, found themselves excluded from the emerging new society. To the Chinese, the works of Western modernism which presented records of desperate isolation and mordant gloom - such as Kafka's Metamorphosis and The Trial held a special attraction.

The Western modernist literature also introduced new devices and techniques in literary creation in China. The Party officials, however, considered the growth of modernism disturbing and tried to hinder its development. Most Chinese writers and readers, on the other hand, welcomed the wave of new literary trends in the country. Some writers believed that "society needed a modernist culture to reflect the new socialist China."[1] For a few years after 1979, newspapers and magazines became the forums for discussions on Modernism. A survey from the People' Daily showed that a growing number of Chinese writers, especially the young ones, were eager to modernize Chinese literature.[2] Many writers were willing to apply Western modernist literary devices to the tenets of socialism. Some writers and artists managed to find a common ground between dogged faith in party policies and technical innovations. Abstract paintings, vague poetry and stream-of-consciousness novels began to appear along with theatrical experiments.

Gao Xingjian belongs to the vanguard of Chinese modernism in theatre. In his book, A Discussion of Contemporary Narrative Techniques (Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan)[3], Gao notes that traditional methods of writing fiction, incorporating refinement of plot, description of scenery and creation of central characters, should give way to modern narrative techniques like stream-of-consciousness, bizarre and alogical writing and artistic abstraction. Gao argues that artistic techniques transcend national frontiers and that the pursuit and absorption of new techniques from other parts of the world is necessary for a healthy development of a nation's literature.[4] To retain the national character does not mean to reject new techniques from other countries. He defines the meaning of indigenization in the following:

> In the process of artistic creation, as long as the writer depicts social reality and characters vividly and realistically, he will automatically represent the social customs, the spiritual world and mode of thought of his nation. His work will have a distinctive national, or indigenous, character.[5]

Gao has published several novels. However his major experiments in modernism are most evident in the field of spoken drama.[6] China adopted Western spoken drama at the beginning of this century. Spoken drama in the realist mode has always been one of the most effective mediams of Party propaganda and problem solving for the communist regime. Because of this no other forms of spoken drama were allowed to be performed until 1982. Although Beckett's Waiting for Godot was translated into Chinese as early as in 1965, the publication of the play did not influence Chinese theatre because of the Cultural Revolution, which started in 1966. A majority of Chinese were not acquainted with the Theatre of the Absurd until 1978, when the translation of Pinter's The Birthday Party was published in World Literature (Shijie wenxue) magazine, together with a lengthy article on the Theatre of the Absurd.[7] Gao Xingjian's play, The Bus-stop was staged in 1983 when, for the first time, Gao introduced devices from the Theatre of the Absurd to the Chinese audience. Since the play was considered China's first attempt in absurd drama, it was severely criticized by the official critics shortly after it was staged.[8] Some critics condemned the play for bringing the dissolute and libertine Theatre of the Absurd to the Chinese stage. Even though the political attitudes towards literary movements have now become more relaxed and many Western modernist literary works have been introduced, the Party officials still dislike the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd because "the world outlook, the philosophical and social stances of the playwrights are idealistic and nihilistic."[9] One official newspaper made the following comment:

> We support the discriminating use of the best modern literature from the West. It has already been shown that when this is done properly, it helps our own creative writers. But we must certainly not lavish uncritical praise on the social attitudes and creative concepts of the Theatre of the Absurd.[10]

Most Chinese critics considered The Bus-stop a reproduction of Waiting for Godot which presented a nihilistic world outlook. The audience, however, welcomed The Bus-stop as a bold new experiment in Chinese spoken drama and dismissed the official criticism since it lacked an objective assessment of the play. Today, Waiting for Godot is regarded as one of Beckett's best creations and is widely acknowledged as a major breakthrough in the drive towards a new form of drama in Western theatre. Similarly, The Bus-stop is now considered to be a breakthrough in the reform of the Chinese theatre which has brought Gao Xingjian to the forefront of modern Chinese playwrights.

Despite relentless criticisms from Party officials, Gao Xingjian has continued to write and publish his ideas on theatre reform, future directions, sources of his inspirations, etc., and has continued to produce theatrical works supporting his ideas. Much of his inspiration come from the works of the masters of modern Western theatre, some of whom, have themselves been inspired by the theatrical traditions of the Far East. This led Gao to search and understand his own culture and traditions and allowed him to blend successfully the elements of modern and traditional Chinese theatres in his plays. He has devoted parts of his life travelling through the countrysides in China for inspiration and deeper understanding of Chinese culture.

This thesis is about Gao Xingjian, his thoughts and his works. It also discusses the sources of his inspirations. Gao has publicly acknowledged his indebtedness to the masters of Western avant-garde theatre and their presence is evident in his plays. However, in spite of incorporating ideas from many sources, Gao Xingjian's works are original and completely Chinese in contents. The last chapter of this thesis examines Gao's most controversial work The Bus-stop and compares it with Beckett's Waiting for Godot. The comparison attempts to show that despite similarities, The Bus-stop is not an imitation of Waiting for Godot but is a good adaptation of devices from a modern Western masterpiece. Gao Xingjian's goal is to produce someday a total theatre which would combine Eastern and Western theatrical techniques, and integrate language and music with the performing arts.

Notes

1 He Li, "Modernism and China: A Summary from the People's Daily," trans. Geremie Barmé, Renditions (1983): 44-48.

2 Ibid. 49-53.

3 An extract of this book has been translated into English by Ng Mau-sang. See Renditions (1983): 55-58. The present translation of the tilte is taken from Renditions.

4 Gao Xingjian, "Contemporary Techniques and National Character in Fiction," trans. Ng Mau-sang, Renditions (1983): 58.

5 Ibid. 57.

6 See Chapter II for details on Chinese spoken drama.

7 See Shijie wenxue (World Literature), No. 2, (1978): 213-310.

8 See Geremie Barmé's "A Touch of the Absurd --Introducing Gao Xingjian, and his play The Bus-stop," Renditions (1983): 373-377.

9 He Wen, "Postscript: On Seeing the Play The Bus-stop," trans. Chan Sin-wai, Renditions (1983): 391.

10 Ibid. 390.

CHAPTER I

GAO XINGJIAN AND HIS WORKS

Gao Xingjian is recognized as one of the most outstanding and controversial modern playwrights in China. After the Cultural Revolution a new generation of writers, to which Gao Xingjian belongs, began experimenting with new forms, blending modernist techniques of the West with Chinese styles to reflect the needs of the changing society and to form their own individual styles.

Gao Xingjian was born in January 4, 1940. According to Zhingguo wenxuejia cidian (A Dictionary of Chinese Literary Figures), he is from Taizhou, Jiangsu province. (That does not neccessary mean that Gao is born in Taizhou, in chinese custom, that usually refers to his family origin.) No reference is avialable about his family background. He studied French at the Beijing Foreign Languages Institute from 1958 to 1962. During this period he developed an understanding of European literature, especially French literature. Upon graduation, Gao worked as an interpreter in the China International Book Store for eight years. During the Cultural Revolution he was sent to a small county in Anhui province where he worked in the fields and later taught in a middle school. Four years of living in the countryside brought him into close contact with the harsh realities of life in rural China. This period also gave him time for extensive study of both Western and Chinese literature. Gao returned to Beijing in 1975. Since then he has worked as a translator and an interpreter for a variety of organizations before becoming a professional writer for the People's Art Troupe (Renmin Yishu Jüyuan) in 1981, China's foremost performing arts company. He had his work published in 1979 and became a member of the Chinese Writers Association (a national organization of China's prominant writers) in the same year.

Gao Xingjian is a proponent of modern Western literature and the new forms and artistic devices of modernism. He translated Ionesco's The Bald Prima Donna (La Cantatrice Chauve) in

1980, and published an introductory book entitled A Preliminary Discussion of Contemporary Narrative Techniques (Xiandai xiaoshuo jiqiao chutan) in 1981. The Bald Prima Donna (written in 1948 and first performed in 1950) is one of Ionesco's best known plays which represents the basic characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd. The book A Preliminary Discussion of Contemporary Narrative Techniques introduces contemporary Western narrative techniques to Chinese readers. In that book, Gao presents opinions which are considered controversial by Chinese official critics. According to him, Balzac's method should be regarded as a classical form and modern writers do not have to aim at creating individuals or at depicting an environment. Gao tells his readers that in modern novels the plot has given way to a variety of new structural styles and that it is necessary for modern Chinese writers to adopt contemporary techniques in their writing. To maintain a so-called national character in literature, it is not necessary to reject new techniques from the West. Gao Xingjian explains:

> Language is a medium through which we think and convey our thoughts. A piece of work written in the native language of a nation will naturally reflect that nation's cultural tradition, the way of life and mode of thought. Irrespective of how a Chinese writer may borrow from foreign techniques, inasmuch as he writes in good, typical Chinese, his work will definitely have a national flavour. The more he grasps the essence of his national culture, the more distinctive will be the national character of his work.[1]

Gao Xingjian has put his belief into practice by using modern Western literary techniques such as stream of consciousness, structuralism, etc., in his writings. He has published several novels utilizing modern narrative techniques. From 1981 to 1985, he published sixteen short stories and novels in different magazines. To name a few novels: A Pigeon Named Red Lip, Friends, After Twenty-Five Years, Mother and On the Other Side of the River. A list of Gao Xingjian's major pulications is included in the apprendix. This list was provided by Gao himself in a letter he wrote to me in 1987. A copy of this letter and the translation of this letter are also attached. His major achievements, however, lie in play writing. His first play The Alarm Signal (Juedui xinhao) was published in 1982 and was staged in Beijing the same year. It was a skillful psychological study of an unemployed young man torn between love and revenge in an uncaring society. The young man was deeply in love with a bee-keeper girl and wanted to marry her. Because he had no job and, therefore, no income, the girl's father rejected his request. In desperation, he joined a gang of robbers which was going to rob a freight train in order to get enough money for the marriage and also to make the act a gesture of rebellion against the society which has rejected him. The young man climbed the train with the gang leader, but happened to find inside the carriage the girl he loved and a long-time friend. The girl had missed the previous train, and was given a lift on this freight train; and the old friend had been working as a guard of the train they planned to rob. The young man was confronted with the fact that he loved his two friends, but now had to turn against them because he needed the money. With some persuasion from his friends, the young man, in the end, decided to turn against his accomplice and joined the fight to protect the train. He was wounded by the gang leader during the fight, but the young man and his friends were happy because he had made the right decision.

In cooperation with director Lin Zhaohua, Gao Xingjian experimented for the first time in China, with several new theatrical devices in staging The Alarm Signal. The play was performed in a theater-in-the-round stage, which was a popular theatre form in the West after the Second World War. The small theatre shortened the distance between the audience and the actors and permitted better stage and audience interaction. A variety of lighting and sound effects were used effectively to present the frequent changes of time and space. The round theatre and the sound and lighting effects were a surprise to the Beijing audience who were accustomed to the traditional frame type of theatre performance, in which a stage is surrounded by walls with only one side open to the audience. This was Gao's first experiment in theatrical innovation, but the play was within the acceptable ideological stance and still followed the model of a realistic Chinese drama with a clear plot, suspense and climax. The Alarm Signal, therefore, was not labelled "Westernized" and was warmly received by both the general audience and the official critics as a work of acceptable experimentation and reform in theatre.

Encouraged by this first success, Gao Xingjian published his second play The Bus-stop (Chezhan) in 1983. The play was staged in June of 1983, in the same small theatre-in-the-round studio. Both stylistically and thematically The Bus-stop went further than The Alarm Signal in breaking away from the solemn eighty-year old conventions of the Chinese "spoken drama." For the first time the Chinese audience was exposed through this play to some aspects of the Theatre of the Absurd; they also heard criticism of their own social problems on the stage. The play, therefore, was very heretical for official critics, and instead of receiving acclaim, was severely criticized.

The Bus-stop is a play about some passengers waiting for a bus. Waiting has been chosen as the main theme of the play to satirize the habitual indolence of some Chinese who put their hopes on some uncertain possibilities and give up self-reliance. The play also attacked various social problems through the characters' random dialogues. Some absurd devices have also appeared in the play, such as the rapid movement of time. Eight passengers wait at a bus-stop for a bus to the city, but the buses never stop for them. One passenger, who is always silent, decides to walk to the city after watching a few buses passing him by without stopping. The remaining seven passengers wait for more than ten years before realizing that their bus- stop had been omitted from the route for a long time. Those passengers have wasted their lives in prolonged, meaningless waiting. The play does not have a clearly defined plot, nor does it have an obvious climax and suspense as in a conventional drama. But it is not an entirely absurd play either. The play, in fact, mixes realism with the devices of absurdity. As the author himself has said, this is a play with an obvious action: everyone in the play wants to go to the city, but is not able to because of various impediments both internal and external. The play also follows the didactic tradition of the Chinese spoken drama. The main moral of the play is that people should be more self-reliant and not depend on uncertain possibilities. But to Chinese officials, such a message advocates individualism, which has always been condemned by the Chinese communist regime.

The Bus-stop has been severely criticized ever since it was staged. The Chinese critics, who were used to realistic drama and communist ideology, felt that the play is seriously flawed both thematically and technically. Thematically, some critics think that the play distorts socialist reality and contributes to the loss of confidence in social reform. The Communist Party launched a movement against the so-called spiritual pollution from 1983 to 1985. During this period the newly introduced Western modernism was under incessant criticism. The Party was afraid that the Western ideology, as it appeared in modernist literature, would pollute the minds of the Chinese people and therefore should be suppressed. Since The Bus-stop was a protest against social problems in a society which believed itself to be perfect, and since the play has employed Western dramatic techniques, it has been a natural target for criticism. An article in the weekly Literary Gazette (Wenyi bao) commented:

> The problem with The Bus-stop is not that it expresses the dark side of life; it is the way it expresses, the things it "symbolizes", that constitutes a distortion of our real life. ... It is a product of blind worship and mechanical copying of the social viewpoints and creative theories of modernist drama in the West. ... It reflects the influence in literature and art of a certain erroneous trend in social thought.[2]

It was only in 1986 that critics in China dared to affirm the value of Gao Xingjian's theatrical innovations. Articles appeared in newspapers and magazines, discussing the aesthetic theories and theatrical techniques used in The Bus-stop and Gao's other plays. One article in Dangdai zhuojia pinglun (Commentaries on Contemporary Writers) considered that Gao's experimentation has renewed the artistic system of spoken drama.[3] More critics recognized that Gao's experimentation is not only Westernized but also national.[4] Gao Xingjian's theatrical experimentations have attracted wide attention both inside and outside China. His latest play On the Other Side of the River (Bi'an) has been translated into Swedish and some of his plays have also been performed in Swedish Royal Theatre.[5] As Geremie Barmé has pointed out:

> With his background in Western literature and culture as well as a thorough grounding in Chinese theatre and writing Gao is the first member of the middle-aged generation of Chinese writers to be capable of such experimentation. As such, his work is naturally given more attention than it would otherwise deserve.[6]

Discussions and criticism of The Bus-stop, in fact, have served to dismantle conformities inherent in the Chinese theatrical and literary world and have paved the way for future experimental works. In the debates, Gao did not defend himself from what he considered to be an unreasonable political condemnation. He remained silent, but continued with his experiments in theatrical reform. One Western scholar has commented: "Gao Xingjian is adept at the juggling of mainland cultural jargon, and so far he has been careful to emphasize the 'tradition' and 'Chinese' aspects of his experiments."[7] But traditional Chinese aspects of Gao's plays exist not only in jargon. The emphasis on the 'tradition' and 'Chinese' aspects are well presented in most of Gao's plays.

Gao Xingjian's theatrical innovations are aimed at blending the Western stage craft with the traditional Chinese theatre. The contemporary Western dramatists' explorations provide examples for his innovations, Gao has admitted, because many *avant-garde* dramatists have tried to combine the Oriental theatre with Western drama. His ideal theatre, Gao has said, "would be based on the traditional Oriental dramatic concepts, but would combine all the merits of both Eastern and Western theatres."[8]

By 1986, he had published six plays. Each play incorporates a certain aspect of his ideas of theatre. His last two plays, The Wildman[9] (Yeren) and On the Other Side of River (Bi'an), are considered breakthroughs in Chinese spoken drama. Gao wants to present a vast and sweeping portrayals of life and reality of modern China in his plays. In order to vividly present real life of Chinese people, Gao Xingjian often travels around the country to reach the real life of the people and collect materials. The characters, setting, costumes and gestures in Gao's plays are usually taken from certain life models. Before writing The Wildman, Gao travelled 15,000 km along the Yangtze River and collected materials including folk music and masks used in the local folk theatre and ritual ceremonies, as well as observed facts about the lives and environments of the people along the Yangtze River. The results of these efforts have been presented in Gao's last two plays The Wildman and On the Other Side of River. In the author's suggestion for the performance of The Wildman, Gao particularly notes that the materials of folk customs in the play are taken from mountain areas along the Yangtze River which are very different from those in northern China and that he hopes the director would keep this local colour.[10]

The Wildman, published in October of 1985, is Gao Xingjian's fifth play. The author calls the play "a multi-phonic modern epic." There are more than forty characters in the play; it covers a period spanning more than a thousand years and encompasses several provinces in China. Singing, dancing, narration and masks are introduced into the performance. Yet it is not a copy of Brecht's epic theatre or Genet's grotesque drama. Nor is it an imitation of traditional Chinese theatre. For example, the singing and dancing are adaptations of folk music and dances from southern China. The masks, instead of relating to the face-paintings of the traditional Chinese theatre, are more like the wood-carved sorcery masks from the Guizhou province. Realistic sceneries are not used. The frequent changes of time and space are depicted through lighting, sound system and acting. The play has no central theme, nor plot, nor heroes. It is a multi-theme epic which deals with various topics such as environmental problems, the study and observation of "wildman," family and marriage problems, the collection of dying folklores, etc. Gao himself considers the play an experiment in dismantling the rigid conventions of the traditional Chinese theatre and, at the same time, in retaining the values of the old theatre. The play brings new dimensions to the spoken drama; thus a refreshing experience for the Chinese audience.

Gao's latest play, On the Other Side of the River published in October of 1986, can be considered extremely absurdist. The play does not only abolish the plot, but also any definite time and place. The characters are merely labelled as Man, Woman, Heart, Buddhist Monk, Shadow, etc. The medium of the play is dialogue, but it serves neither the purpose of communication nor the presentation of theme. The characters talk about bitterness and happiness in life, about beauty and ugliness in the world, without conforming to any particular moral standards. The play deals with universal aspects of the human condition, as in the plays of Western Absurdist dramatists. The dialogues are neither arguments nor discursive speeches, but are flows of verbal images similar to what might be found in modern poetry. The play attempts to provide a sense to life, and yet, it does not investigate or solve problems of conduct or morality. On the Other Side of the River incorporates more features of the Theatre of the Absurd than any of Gao's other plays, but the content is Chinese. The play is often considered as an exemple of Chinese modernist or absurdist play. The absurd and abstract aspects of the play make it difficult for directors and actors to present it on the stage and the dark side of human nature expressed in the play makes it hard for the Chinese communist authorities to accept it. After a few failed attempts, the play has not been performed in mainland China again. The play was staged recently (June 1990) for the first time in Taibei, Taiwan.[11] The Taiwanese director of the play considers the play a combination of modern poetry and painting which depicts well the blindness and near-sightedness of the masses. The director feels that what the play presents is very similar to what has happened in Taiwanese society in recent years.[12] Since Gao Xingjian has never been to Taiwan, this comment seems to indicate that Gao's play has presented the general qualities of the Chinese culture and is relevant to any community where Chinese life style prevails.

In an interview with Jiangxi Daily (Jianxi ribao), Gao Xingjian comments that artistic creation should not be a repetition and that he tries in his plays not to repeat other authors or himself.[13] Gao's plays are all different from each other in theme and structure. There is also a clear indication that his works have become increasingly daring and abstract. Gao Xingjian himself has divided his plays into three stages of development which began with The Alarm Signal as the first stage, followed by The Bus-stop as the second stage, and The Wildman and On the Other Side of the River as the third stage. The Alarm Signal is a realistic play, though it has employed some new stage techniques such as a particular use of light and sound system and it is staged in a theatre-in-the-round. The play has a clearly developed plot and conveys a didactic message. The second play, The Bus-stop, though lacking a well developed plot or a story, still conveys definite messages for didactic purposes. Even in The Wildman, which is a multi-theme epic, the audience among other mixed themes still can decipher the author's important messages related to the saving of the environment and the folk culture. This is not the case in On the Other Side of the River. Though ambiguous in plot, the play is designed to express ordinary persons' confusion and frustration in society. The dialogue is abstract, philosophical and sometimes absurd, flowing with the stream of consciousness, and very colloquial.

The influence of Western contemporary dramatists is evident in all of Gao's plays. Techniques such as the theatre-in-the-round, light and sound effects, polyphonic dialogues, and so on, have all been a part of post-War Western theatrical conventions, but such techniques are new to the Chinese audience. Gao Xingjian is candid about his indebtedness to the masters of modern Western theatre. In a series of essays on theatricality, Gao has systematically explained his ideas about theatre and theatre reform. His basic theory reflects Antonin Artaud's view of "theatre as the double of life not the same as literature" and the desire for a drama in which each performance is "a kind of happening" that would shake the audience and produce a cathartic effect on them.[14] Gao's interest in adding narration, masks, singing and dancing to stage acting can also be traced back to Brecht's epic theatre and Genet's plays. Although Gao believes that the theatre should not be a part of literature, he does not deny the function of language in theatre. He has said, "I am against literarization of the theater, but that does not mean I want to get rid of language."[15] He admires Beckett for his skillful use of language and has tried to learn from him.

Gao's command of language is clearly shown in his works. He has absorbed good qualities from various schools of modern drama in the West. However, it would be incorrect to say that Gao's works merely follow Western examples, since Western theatre reformers of the early twentieth century have borrowed extensively from the Oriental theatre, including traditional Chinese theatre. It would be difficult to separately define the influences of Western modern drama and traditional Chinese theatre on Gao's works, since there is a close link between the two. A brief survey of Chinese theatrical traditions and specific aspects of Western influences should therefore aid in the understanding of Gao Xingjian's theatrical innovations.

Notes

1 Gao Xingjian, "Contemporary Techniques and National Character in Fiction," trans. Ng Mau-sang Renditions (1983) 56. This article is taken from Gao's book Xiandai xiaoshou jiqiao chutan (A Preliminary Discussion of Contemporary Narrative Techniques) (Guangzhou: Huacheng Press, 1981) 111-17.

2 He Wen, "Postscript: On Seeing the Play The Bus-stop," Literary Gazette, trans. Chan Sin-wai Renditions (1983) 387-92.

3 Xia Gang, "Dangdai qishilu: Gao Xingjian huaju shijie mianmian guan" (Contemporary Enlightenment: An Overview of Gao Xingjian's World of Spoken Drama), Dangdai zhoujia pinglun (Commentaries on Contemporary Writers) No. 2 (1986): 48.

4 Zhang Yi, "Lun Gao Xingjian de meixue tansou" (On Gao Xingjian's Aesthetic Exploration), Xiju No. 4 (1986): 65-75.

5 Gao Xingjian, "Guanyu Bi'an" (About **On the Other Side of the River**), Central Daily News International ed., June 22, 1990.

6 Geremie Barmé, "A Touch of the Absurd-- Introducing Gao Xingjian, and His Play The Bus-stop," Renditions (1983): 377.

7 Ibid.

8 Gao Xingjian, "Dui yizhong xiandai xijude suiqui" (In Pursuit of a Modern Theatre), Da Gong Daily (Hongkong, July 2, 1987). Unless otherwise indicated, the translations hereafter are all mine.

9 "Yeren," literally meaning "wildman" in Chinese, has been a mystery to the Chinese for thousands of years. There was an article about "yeren" in the Edmonton Journal. The following quotation may provide some idea about the mysterious "Wildman":

> In Hubei and nearby provinces, the "ye ren" --Chinese for "Wildman"-- has inspired a legend as pervasive as that of the yeti in the Himalayas and the sasquatch of North America. Sightings of wildmen in China have been recorded for some 2,500 years and images of the ye ren appear on many paintings and even ancient currency.

See Malcolm W. Browne, "Solid New Evidence Renews Interest in China's 'Wildman'," Edmonton Journal June 10, 1990: C 8.

Gao Xingjian's play is located in Shennong region, Hubei province where the mysterious "yeren" is supposed to live and the play is partly related to the search for "yeren."

10 Gao Xingjian, The Wildman: A Collection of Gao Xingjian's Drama (Gao Xingjian xijuji) (Beijing: Masses Press, [Quzhong chubanshe] 1985), 273.

11 See Gao Xingjian, "Guanyu Bi'an."

12 See Chen Lingling, "Ran women woshou" (Let us shake hands), The Central Daily News International ed., June 22, 1990.

13 Hu Jie, Xu Rong, "Xuede rechen, xinde chaoxi: fang juzhoujia Gao Xingjian" (An Interview with Dramatist Gao Xingjian), Jiangxi Daily Oct. 5, 1986: 4.

14 See Antonin Artaud, The Theatre and Its Double, trans. Marry Carolin Richards (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1958).

15 Gao Xingjian, "What Kind of Theatre Do We Need," Literature and Arts Studies (Wenyi yanjiu) (April, 1986) 90.

CHAPTER II

CHINESE THEATRICAL TRADITIONS AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR GAO XINGJIAN'S EXPERIMENTS

Chinese traditional theatre has its own unique system which differs greatly from modern Western theatre. Gao Xingjian has attempted to produce an ecletic theatre which would selectively combine the elements of both of these theatrical art forms. He has been an advocate of such experiments, but above all, he has maintained that the new theatre should still retain the 'Chinese' character by incorporating elements of traditional Chinese theatre. For such innovations, he has urged Chinese dramatists to develop an understanding of their theatrical traditions. Gao's own works have provided examples of such innovations.

To understand the sources of influence on Gao's creation, this chapter will first provide an overview of the history and development of Chinese theatre. It will then highlight the elements of traditional Chinese theatre followed by an examination of their relevance to Gao Xingjian's theatrical experiments.

1.0. An Overview of the History and Development of Chinese Theatre:

Chinese theatre may have originated, according to most studies of the history of Chinese theatre, from shamanistic religious ceremonies, especially those in honour of harvest gods.[1] This, however, has not been substantiated by any positive evidence.[2] In this context it may be reasonable to assume that Chinese theatre may have derived its forms from a variety of sources.[3] Early performances were merely comprised of singing and dancing with simple story-sketches. Records, dating as far back as 200 B.C.[4] referred to "hundred entertainments" (baixi) which may include rudimentary forms of theatrical performance. Emperors were said to have sponsored dramas both for enjoyment and accompaniment of sacrifices to ancestors and gods. Dance, in some instances, was intimately connected with the Tang dynasty (618-907) play-acting. A number of dances in the form of musical sketches flourished during this period, utilizing flute, clappers and drums as musical instruments. Actors and actresses, sometimes wearing masks (damian), presented simple stories through singing and dancing.[5] Emperor Xuan-zong (712-756) of the Tang dynasty is especially known for his sponsorship of court entertainment. He not only enjoyed "dramatic" performances, but also set up special schools to train performers and sometimes participated in the teaching.[6]

Glorious moments in the history of Chinese theatre occured during the periods of Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1280-1368) dynasties, especially in the Yuan dynasty, when the Mongols ruled China. Many scholars, unwilling or unable to serve the court during this period, applied their creative energies or released their frustrations by writing songs and scripts for plays. It is during this period that the development of Chinese theatre reached its first summit. Guan Hanqing (1220-1300), Bai Pu (1226-1306), Ma Zhiyuan (fl. c. 1280), Zheng Guangzu (c.1280 - c.1330) and Wang Shifu (fl. late 13th century)[7] are the best known Yuan playwrights. Dramatic performances of this period were divided into two schools: the northern style (*zhajü*) and the southern style (*nanxi*). *Zhajü* and *nanxi* were different in many respects, including music, expression of feelings and categorization of role-types. The sixteenth century dramatist, Wang Shizhen (1527-90) summarized some of the distinct characteristics of the two schools. He wrote:

> In the northern [drama], there are many words and the melody is hurried... in the southern words are few but the melody is slow... . So in the north there are many emotions in the words but few emotions in the sounds, while in the south, there are few emotions in the words but many in the sounds. The strength of the northern is in string [instruments], while the strength of the southern is in the beat.... The spirit of the northern [school] tends to be coarse, and that of the southern [school] to be soft.[8]

The northern and southern types of drama of the Song and Yuan dynasties were the first in China's theatrical history to demonstrate clearly the differentiation of dramatic styles by regions.

Zhaju was the most popular theatrical form in the Yuan dynasty and *Nanxi* (southern plays) was then performed in the southern part of China only. The Jin dynasty arose from the north to oust the Song dynasty in 1115, but was destroyed by the Mongols in 1234. Plays of that period were known as Song *zhaju* and Jin *yuanben*. The southern plays became popular during the Ming dynasty and were known as *chuanqi*. However, the process of interchange among different forms of drama was apparent. Dramatists often used melodies from both northern and southern styles in a single work. In both schools singing and dancing were prominent parts of the performances.

During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) there was considerable flowering and diversification of regional dramas. Among various theatrical schools, one known as *chuanqi*, was the successor of *nanxi* and became particularly popular. Like *nanxi*, most *chuanqi* writers were from the southern provinces. *Chuanqi* plays used southern music, which included all varieties of music of that region. By the middle of the sixteenth century, a southern music form, known as *Kunshan-qiang* began to dominate other forms of music of the time. Originating in Kunshan (Jiangsu province), *Kunshan-qiang*, though essentially southern in character, utilized both southern and northern musical tunes. Since the lyrics of *Kunshan-qiang* music were composed for the prosody of northern and southern tunes (*qu*), dramas principally performed to this music were referred to by its abbreviated term *kunqu*. The *kunqu* soon became popular, not only in the south, but also in Beijing and in other parts of northern China. It later became an important element of the Peking Opera. The *kunqu* developed a significant body of written dramatic literature and in this respect was a successor to *zhaju* and *nanxi*. Among many *kunqu* playwrights of the Ming dynasty period, Tang Xian-zhu (1550-1617) is considered to be the most famous of all post-Yuan Chinese dramatists. He is often referred to as "the Chinese Shakespeare."

Kunqu reached the highest point of its development during the Ming period, but this theatrical form began to decline during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), and the Peking Opera became an independent and widely popular form ever since. Peking Opera or *Jing-ju* is, in fact, a combination of various regional theatres. Apart from *erh-huang*, a theatrical tune from Anhui province, Peking Opera also embraces other styles of music and acting, some of which still exist, largely as independent theatrical forms. The synthetic nature of Peking Opera facilitated easy acceptance in all parts of the country. It was later considered to be the representative of traditional Chinese theatre and became well known in the world. In the following study, unless otherwise indicated, the term 'traditional Chinese theatre' will refer to the Peking Opera.

The spoken drama (i.e., the non-operatic form of drama) was introduced in China from the West only at the beginning of this century, under the name of *huaju*. A group of young students, dissatisfied with the remoteness of the Chinese dramatic literature from Chinese society, found their model for a new Chinese drama in the fast developing Western society and its theatre practices. During the "New Literature Movement" launched around 1917, the traditional Chinese theatre was criticized for its remoteness in both form and content from the reality of life.[9] The affluence and power of the West, and the rapid progress in Japan due to its selective adoption of Western technology, convinced the Chinese intellectuals that selective Westernization was the only way to resurrect China. The 1919 May Fourth movement, started with a large demonstration in Beijing to protest against China's betrayal at the Paris Peace Conference, also called for total abolition of traditional literature and advocated the use of the 'vernacular' as the vehicle of literary expression. (The traditional Chinese literary works such as poetry and essays are written in a classical language[10] which is very different from the spoken language; therefore it can not be easily understood by the ordinary people.) It was in such an atmosphere that Western realistic drama was introduced on the Chinese stage. Zola's proclamation that the experimental and scientific spirit should dominate the stage of the modern age[11] was well received as a guideline to abolish the classical theatre and to establish the new spoken drama, which proved effective in dealing with social reality. Spoken drama has, ever since its introduction to China, always been useful as an effective medium for political movements. The young intellectuals educated in the West, consciously intended to use the new drama to promote social change.

Until the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945), the spoken drama was popular only among urban intellectuals. The traditional theatre was still the most popular form among the majority of Chinese people. The War of Resistance (1937-45) provided great opportunities for the growth and popularization of spoken drama, since it became an important organ of propaganda during the War. Actors made it their business to fortify morale and spread optimism among the population, and dramatists produced a considerable amount of fiercely patriotic plays. Since this form of drama was easy to perform, many amateur troupes were formed to act in the villages and factories to promote patriotic feelings. In communist ruled areas, spoken drama was steadily fostered to maintain morale and disseminate propaganda. Before 1949, it was instrumental in popularizing the theatre on contemporary themes; since 1949, up to the post-Mao era, it has continued to serve the same purpose and enjoyed the support of the Chinese authorities.

After eighty years of development, the spoken drama has now been established as a strong force in Chinese theatre along with other traditional theatrical forms. The new drama has accumulated a large body of dramatic, theatrical and theoretical writings produced by native writers, in addition to translations of Western dramas. The spoken drama, being realistic in nature, attracts not only the intellectual audience but also a large number of young people from different backgrounds who prefer the new theatre because it is easy to understand.

2.0. The Elements of Traditional Chinese Theatre:

Generally, it is possible to state that the Chinese theatre was developed in the following stages, with deepening interest in plot development.[12] During the first stage of development, from the early Han dynasty to Sui dynasty (2nd Century B.C. to the beginning of the 7th century A.D.), simple story sketches involving a minimum of plot were presented between acrobatic performances. Legendary or historical names were tagged to the wrestling acts to enhance interest. The acrobatic acts, like the dances of the time, were basically impersonal displays of skills; and the lengendary background added little meaning to the performances, and this part was not essential to the audience's enjoyment of the show. From the Tang dynasty (618-907) to the early part of the Song dynasty (960-1279) the plot or action became a significant factor to the understanding of performances. Although there was still little interest in the plot as such, the farce and dramatic dance of this period could not be effective without the audience knowing the story. However, the performances of this period were still too short to allow any meaningful development of the plot, and singing and dancing were still the essential parts of the performances. The development of the drama, as an unfolding of a series of events (from the beginning to a crisis and then ending in the outcome of the crisis) started during late Song and Jin dynasties. Although these plays presented specific themes, they were still mostly slapstick playlets. It was not until the Yuan dynasty that the Chinese theatre began presenting stories from legends and history which incorporated plots and development of events with a mild climax. Also during this last stage of development the Chinese theatre established its distinct performing techniques.

The plot structure, however, was never a primary concern for the Chinese dramatists. The primary interest of the Chinese dramatists lay in the poetry and the music. Dramatists often selected popular stories for their plays, which allowed them to focus their attention on the lyrics, while the actors could concentate on singing and on associated gestures of dance. During thousands of years of development, traditional Chinese theatre has evolved into a complete theatrical convention, very different from modern Western theatre.

When Chinese drama was first introduced to Europe in the early 18th century, most Western dramatists of the time were attracted by its interesting subjects and stories, but at the same time they despised its dramaturgy, which they considered to be barbarous. In his dedication of L'Orphelin de la Chine to the Duke of Richelieu, Voltaire exalted Chinese drama for its vivid portrayal of human actions and its moral instructions, yet scorned its poor dramaturgy: "There was no unity of time or action, no picture of the manners, no sentiment, eloquence, reason or passion."[13] At the beginning of this century, an evaluation of the classical Chinese theatre was provided by Sheldon Cheney as follows:

> Truth to tell, dramatic literature in China never reached the importance as Sophocles or Shakespeare endowed it with in the West. The Chinese themselves make no claims for it; and even allowing for the lack of language-embroidery values possibly lost in translation, the Western reader may agree that Chinese plays are little more than melodrama or hack journalistic plays -- or grand opera *libretti*. The situations are pretty well standardized, the characters run to obvious types, the "effects" are neither deeply dramatic nor cumulatively emotional. All that the Western mind craves in tragedy is overlooked or dissipated: that dramatic structure, suspense, psychological truth. The casual nature of the plot, indeed, explains the apparently shattering confusion in the auditorium, the constant going and coming of spectators, the tea-drinking, the conversations and eating and even games while the actors are going through a particularly important passage. There is no continuity of mood, no built-up tension. The performance probably lasts from late afternoon till after midnight; but the programme includes several plays. As the actors from one go out of the exit door the players of the next enter by the other, so that the action is continuous. And so is the music that sounds so squeaky and clangy to Western ears.[14]

Mr. Cheney's knowledge of the Chinese classical theatre is commendable, but he clearly did not understand this alien theatre form on its own terms. As a scholar, trained in orthodox Western literary theory, and therefore, with different literary sensibility, it is expected that Mr. Cheney would judge the Chinese classical theatre by the canonized Western dramatic tradition and its standards. The Western dramatists, at that time, when adapting Chinese drama, tended to modify its structure into a "proper" form to suit their purposes.

By Western standards the Chinese classical drama contains the qualities of the epic and lyric. The songs have been written in verse and they are often poems of high quality. Narratives are used to set dramatic situations, explain events and sometimes to express emotions. Lyrics are used to describe scenery, stage actions and most importantly, to depict the complex state of the characters' psychology. The action flows through various locales and often spans considerable time and space. The classical Chinese theatre, which is best known to the West through the Peking Opera, possesses some special characteristics that set the classical Chinese theatre apart from other traditions in the world, notably those of the Western tradition. The following description of Chinese drama from Stephen H. West is perhaps most fitting:

> First, it is music drama and the music is drawn from many native and foreign sources; second, the dramas may be staged as fragments (i.e. in one or more scenes); third, the major literary form is poetry (i.e. lyric); and fourth, all dramas rely on "role types", theophastrian characters rather than mimetic, representational characters.[15]

These four characteristics, in broadest terms, represent the non-realistic nature of the classical Chinese theatre, which, as a synthetic performing art form, is highly stylized. An actor is at the same time a singer, a dancer and sometimes a performer of physical feats. Characters come in set types and follow strict conventions for voice techniques, gestures, movements, recitations, declamation; they sing, pose and move about in stylized gaits, creating a world which is remote from that of the audience.[16] Dramatic stylization of a Chinese theatre requires it to follow conventions which have long been accepted by both the audience and the performers.

Traditional Chinese theatre achieves its plasticity through conventions. A table and a few chairs, through different placements, may serve to represent a city wall, a mountain, a bed, etc. The conventional use of design and colour in the head dress, costume and make-up of different role types serve to indicate the characters' personalities, social status, age and sex. Conventional movements aid in direct communication between the actors and the audience. Through simple gestures, the actors may describe the opening and closing of doors and windows, movement over rough terrains, conditions related to darkness, heat, cold, rain and storm, and even the shifting of time and space. These conventional stylizations refer to the divergence between the behaviors of daily life and their representation on the stage -- the non-realistic representation within a particular style. (A parallel to this type of performance in the Western tradition would be the Commedia del' arte.)

A Chinese actor never pretends to be in a real situation when he is acting on stage. Brecht was very much impressed by the Chinese performance he saw in Moscow in 1935 and commented:

> The Chinese artist never acts as if there was a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him. He expresses his awareness of being watched. This immediately removes one of the European stage's characteristic illusions. The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place.[17]

The realistic theatre tends to portray reality on the stage. When presenting a room on the stage, an attempt is made to represent the setting as real as possible. The spectator looks into this room as if through a missing fourth wall; whereas in Chinese theatre, an actor, demonstrating how he opens an absent door, expects the audience to imagine the room.

The main function of the Chinese traditional theatre is to entertain the audience. The Chinese always think of the theatre as a place for entertainment. The audience comes to the theatre to enjoy. As they watch the show, the audience might smoke, eat and talk, since the stories of the performances are usually familiar. The morals of the events in a traditional Chinese play are usually offered in black and white; the message is unequivocal and complete. Nothing is left to chance, so that the public most often comprehends no more and no less than the intended message of the play.

The Chinese theatre combines entertainment with a ready-made moral. In a typical Chinese classical theatre mimetic verisimilitude is not the main concern, but rather the characters are presented as an embodiment of generalized philosophical or moral truths and beauty. The greatly stylized performances are intended to present abstract moral principles, teaching correct behavior in a highly ritualized social world in which people usually behave according to a certain set of social rules. Like other popular literature in China, such as novels and story-telling, the Chinese classical theatre, besides having amusement as its primary function, is also effectively didactic. The audience does not identify with the stylized characters, as in a modern Western realistic theatre, yet they see the role types in a drama as projections of their own hopes and their own sense of justice.

The unrealistic nature of the Chinese classical theatre results in qualities which are associated with both the art of performance and the drama as the literary art. The lack of attention to mimetic action deemphasises the plot development and the Chinese classical theatre, with its qualities of musical drama, provides no suspense. Its primary function is to entertain. The focus of a stage performance is the singing of arias. Since the story is familiar, the audience mostly concentrates on how the actors sing rather than what they sing. However, the lyrics of these arias also represent the value of Chinese theatre as literature. Many well-known poets in the Yuan dynasty wrote for dramatic troupes and their works are compared to the best poems of the Tang and Song dynasties. Since the contents of the arias are highly poetic, they are appreciated by the learned audience while the uninitiated are able to enjoy the style of singing. This eventually makes theatre entertaining for people from all segments of society. The lack of a structured plot is also one of the reasons that a Chinese drama may be staged in fragments. It was a custom in China that a private banquet could include theatrical entertainment and the honoured guests had the privilege to choose a particular excerpt in a play. During the early period of the Qin dynasty, Li Yü wrote,

> When choosing plays for a performance, the eminent people of today ask for lists of single scences instead of complete dramas, because they want to see their favourite excerpts only and do not wish to have to sit through the less interesting parts of the complete drama.[18]

Traditionally, Chinese dramas are not classified according to the genres such as tragedy, comedy and so on, but according to the type of technical skills required in a performance. The plays are basically divided either into military plays, in which acrobatic skills predominate, or civil plays, in which mime and singing are important.

As noted earlier, in traditional Chinese theatre, the emphasis is not placed on mimetic verisimilitude, but on the aesthetic elements such as artistic movements in stage performances. Chinese actors, in this regard, have more freedom on the stage compared to their Western colleagues. The actors play the roles of the characters, but they do not "feel" like the characters as in, for example, Stanislavsky's realistic theatre.[19] It is not very common in modern Western theatre for an actor to play the role of a narrator to explain a situation, describe scenery, or even comment on the play itself by speaking directly to the audience. In Chinese theatre an actor may do all these and he/she is also free to express emotions in a voice and gestures that do not bear resemblance to everyday life. Space and time are not restricted. Within one act, the actors may take the audience to several different places without a change in the stage scenery. In fact, there is no scenery on the stage. The audience becomes aware of the shifting of time and space through conventionalized gestures, movements and the actors' singing and acting. For example, one gesture may symbolize an ascent onto heaven or descent into the ocean. In the legendary story of Havoc in Heaven [Danao Tiangong], which portrays the Monkey King's frolics and battles with the gods, the actor in a series of somersaults indicates his ascent onto heaven. In another story of the Monkey King, The Cave behind the Waterfall [Shuiliandong], there are scenes of him playing with the ocean waves. In a study of the Chinese classical theatre, A. C. Scott pointed out that:

> Throughout the physical change, however, the innate Chinese sense of spatial pliancy has remained to dominate stage practices. The unities of time and place are relegated to the domain of mime and dance. Movement and gesture are complete statements in themselves as a communicative force with dimensions beyond the scope of social verisimilitude.[20]

The traditional Chinese theatre has established its unique dramaturgy and principles during the long process of its development. It presents real life situations through a complete set of strict formulae and rules, and reveals a complex and panoramic picture of social life through simple stage forms. All the expressive techniques of traditional Chinese theatre are based on real life, but they attain their stage forms only after the creative refinement exercised by the artists of preceding generations.

3.0. The Chinese Theatrical Tradition and Gao Xingjian's Experiments

Since the beginning of this century an increasing number of Western dramatists have attempted to reintegrate various theatrical elements into a synthetic whole. They found a living example of the fusion of action, music, dance and mime in the traditional Chinese theatre. Dramatists like Brecht, Artaud, and Genet introduced new devices in their experimental dramas which may have been derived directly or indirectly from the traditional Chinese theatre and other Oriental theatres. In these experiments, the European audience was made to experience such new devices as the free-flowing scenes, the symbolic gestures, re-introduction of narration, music and songs, the use of masks and face-paintings, all of which bear clear resemblance to theatres of the Far East, including traditional Chinese theatre.

The admiration of Chinese theatrical traditions in the West served to greatly inspire modern Chinese playwrights and helped them to regain pride and confidence in their own traditions. Gao Xingjian is convinced that he is able to use his knowledge of Chinese traditions to discover virtues that hitherto have remained buried in the classical Chinese theatre and employ such discoveries in his theatrical innovations. He has stated that: "It is already an out-dated idea to consider drama as an art of language. The foundation of drama are gestures (*dongzuo*)."[21]

This idea can be traced back to the elements of traditional Chinese theatre noted earlier, and Gao's statement is meant to rebuild the confidence in its virtues. *Dongzuo* literarily means physical movement or gesticulation of the actor. However, Gao's plays essentially belong to the category of modern drama, which is modelled on Western realistic drama, and in which dialogue is the main medium. Nevertheless, in order to seek potential means in theatrical arts, Gao has applied traditional elements such as singing, dancing and masks to make the performances more enjoyable. It is the quality of the traditional Chinese theatre, the synthetic art form, which attracts Gao's interest. But at the same time, he is not inclined to follow the rigid patterns of the traditional theatre. In his experiments, Gao Xingjian has not used the traditional singing format, but has introduced folk music as well as Western orchestra to the performances, as in The Bus-stop and The Wildman. Music, Gao emphasizes, should be a part of theatrical language. In his early plays, Gao Xingjian utilized Western music mostly to create a mood, describe a situation, or to present a character's attitude. Gao first introduced singing in the play The Wildman. The material for the play was gathered from a certain region in Hubei province which is believed to be the habitat of the mythical Wildmen. Gao has incorporated folk songs and music of the region in this play to maintain characteristics of the region's folk customs, as well as to make the long performance more enjoyable. The wide range of music includes work songs of lumberjacks, wedding songs and instrumental music, and a long narrative song related to the history of the region.

Gao believes that to present the essential art quality of a drama, nothing serves better than the mask. A play, Gao suggests, should be like a game to an adult. It is easier for a child to imagine himself as somebody else in a game. Adults may need the help of masks to imagine themselves to be someone else in a play.[22] During the early periods in the development of traditional Chinese theatre (before the Song dynasty), the actor wore masks. Later the mask patterns were painted directly on faces. The patterns followed the established rules to indicate characters' role types. The bright colours and bold patterns help to take away much of the likeness of a human face; however, a painted face is more life-like than a mask since it does not change the actual shape of an actor's face and also because an actor is not totally deprived of his capacity for facial expressions. Masks, on the other hand, can be more readily changed and for different facial expression a different type of mask must be worn, otherwise the effect might be inappropriate or even comical.

Gao Xingjian has experimented with both face paintings and masks in his plays and used them for the best possible effects. He first introduced face paintings in one of his Modern Opera Sketches. Four characters were painted with four different types of facial makeups to perform different roles in the play, yet, unlike in traditional Chinese theatre, no traditional music was used and the dialogue was the only medium of the play. The choice of face- painting instead of masks and the use of dialogue as a contemporary medium of expression, together afforded the actors a maximum of freedom in expression. At the same time the face paintings also helped to maintain the 'Chinese' character of the play. When Gao Xingjian introduced masks in his play The Wildman, he used the wood-carved sorcery masks from the Guizhou province rather than face-paintings. The unchanging expressions on the masks were exploited for comic effect. In the play, for example, neutral facial masks are worn by some lumbermen when they cut a huge tree. Their dance and their masks, devoid of expression, are contrasted with the sad music and the bitter sound of falling trees, which might be seen as a satire on men's ignorant destruction of nature. More actors wear masks on the stage by the end of the play. The stage direction reads: "Actors and actresses wear different masks which represent exaggerated facial expressions of happiness and anger; sadness and delight. All these are united in a humourous style."[23]

In traditional Chinese theatre, an actor often plays the role of a narrator to communicate directly with the audience. Communication between the actor and the audience helps to create a harmonious atmosphere in the theatre and increases the theatricality of the performance. In order to create this kind of harmony, Gao has introduced narration in his plays. Instead of talking to oneself as the soliloquy in some realistic plays, Gao's characters often talk directly to the audience about their feelings, their past and explain the present situation. This idea is best presented in his one-man show called Monologue, in which an actor speaks directly to the audience about the art of performance. A good actor, Gao suggests, should be able to act on the stage without the transparent fourth wall. The actor should be able to go to the audience to be a part of them and also be able to go back to his role in an instant. The lone actor in the Monologue talks sometimes as a bystander, sometimes as an actor of multiple roles, and sometimes he is himself: a man who is ready to perform on the stage. Lighting and sound systems are also used to help reach that goal. Most of Gao's plays were performed in the theatre-in-the-round stage which shortens the distance between the audience and the actors, thus making communication more intimate than in a frame-type theatre.

Gao Xingjian realizes that in terms of representing real life situations it would be impossible for a theatre to compete with film and television. In order to attract the audience, Gao believes theatres must develop their own specialties which can not be replaced by either cinema or television. The quintessence of dramatic art is theatricality (*juchangxing*). Gao says:

> When the spectators come to the theatre to see a play, it is not so much that they are looking for a verisimilar reality, rather they want to experience the atmosphere of interaction between actors and the audience in the theatre. This interaction may be referred to as theatricality. When this theatricality is combined with the fictionality of the stage, the actors come under the gaze of the audience, extend their highest acting capabilities, and enter into communication with the audience. They use their best dramatic techniques to make the audience reflect, feel moved and excited, applaud and cheer. Those spectators, who are unwilling to sit in front of a "cold" television screen to watch broadcasted programs, and who would rather spend money on tickets to see live theatre, are seeking this type of communication which can be felt whole, with body and mind, aren't they? And this is the quintessence of the art of the theatre.[24]

The unrealistic and entertaining qualities are the basic characteristics of traditional Chinese theatre. In a suggestion related to the performance of The Bus-stop, Gao Xingjian once extolled the artistic performances in the traditional Chinese theatre. He suggested that the actors of The Bus-stop should learn from traditional theatrical performers in order to present the play vividly but not mimetically: "The art of the theatre lies in a vivid but non-realistic performance within a hypothetical environment."[25]

For Gao, since realism is no longer a concern in theatrical performances, time and space, therefore, regain freedom as in traditional Chinese theatre. In Gao's plays, the actors indicate the movement of time and the change of space through their acting and with the help of the lighting and sound systems, while the stage settings remain unchanged. The modern theatre, Gao has suggested, could utilize all types of devices to create theatricality. A playwright can employ different techniques from different sources and not be limited by one tradition. In The Alarm Signal, the only scenery, that of a cargo train, at first appears limiting, but from the dialogues in the play, together with the sound and lighting effects, the audience is able to experience the characters' past life and their dreams about the future. In another play, On the Kabula Mountain Pass, the lighting and sound systems also help to create the stage effect of a passenger compartment of an airplane, side by side with a five-thousand meter high mountain pass. Gao says: "The art of theatre resides in the creation of a convincing world in a fictional environment through a vivid yet unreal performance. This fictionality of theatre provides multiple possibilities for a free arrangement of time and space.[26]

To blend the Western stage craft with traditional Chinese theatre, without being restrained by either, is the main principle of Gao's works. Oriental dramatic techniques and aesthetic concepts have greatly influenced occidental theatrical reforms. In return, Chinese dramatists like Gao Xingjian are animated by the Western dramatists' experiments and see their old tradition in a new light.

Notes

1 For shamanistic religious ceremonies as the origin of Chinese theatre, see A. E. Zucker, The Chinese Drama (Boston: Little, Brown And Co., 1925); J. R. Hightower, Topics in Chinese Literature revised ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard-Yenching Institute, 1953); Zhou Yi-bai, Zhongguo xiqu fazhanshi gangyao (An Outline of the Development of Chinese Drama) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1979).

2 Colin Mackerras, The Chinese Theatre: from Its Origins to the Present Day (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983) 1-6.

3 Tao-ching Hsu, The Chinese Conception of the Theatre (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985) 299-304.

4 The early theatre in the Han dynasty was known as Hundred Games (baixi), which included various entertainments besides theatrical performances. Synthetic dances and singing presented simply sketched stories. The performances also included combat and acrobatics. See William Dolby, A History of Chinese Drama (London: Paul Elek, 1976) 2-5.

5 See Zhou Yibai, Zhougguo xiqu fazhanshi gangyao 41-43.

6 See Colin Mackerras, The Chinese Theatre 13-15.

7 See William Dolby, A History of Chinese Drama (London: Elek Books Limited, 1976) 40-60.

8 Quoted from Colin Mackerras, The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times: From 1840 to the Present Day (London: Thames and Hudson, 1975) 14.

9 Zheng Zenduo, ed. Wenxue zhenglunji (A Collection of Literary Debates) (Shanghai: Liangyu Publishers Inc., 1935) 403-433. Vol. 2 of Zhongguo xinwenxue daxi (An Anthology of Chinese New Literature).

10 The Chinese classical novel is based on the vernacular language of the time, which is different from that of poetry and essays. Drama uses both literary language. The singing part is lyric verse while the dialogue part is vernacular language.

11 Emile Zola, "Preface to Thérèse Raquin," European Theories of the Drama ed. Barrett H. Clark (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1965) 377-78.

12 See Tao-ching Hsu, The Chinese Conception of the Theatre 299-304; William Dolby, "Early Chinese Plays and Theatre," Chinese Theatre, ed. Colin Mackerras, 7-32; Zhanggen and Guo Hancheng, Zhongguo xiju tongshi (A General History of Chinese Theatre) (Beijing: China Drama Press, 1980) 3-108.

13 Voltaire, The Works of Voltaire, tr. William F. Fleming, Vol. XV (Paris: Dumont, 1901) 179.

14 Sheldon Cheney, The Theatre: Three Thousand Years of Drama, Acting and Stagecraft (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1929) 119- 20.

15 Stephen H. West, "Drama," The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature, ed. William H. Nienhauser, J.R. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 13.

16 About the genealogy of the types of characters in traditional Chinese theatre, see Tao-ching Hsu, The Chinese Conception of the Theatre 43-44, 341-351; Pe-chin Chang, Chinese Opera and Painted Face (Taiwan: Meiya Books Limited, 1969) 18-21; and William Dolby, A History of Chinese Drama 8-9.

17 John Willett, tr. and ed., Brecht on Theatre (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964) 91.

18 Tao-ching Hsu, The Chinese Conception of the Theatre 314-15.

19 See The Theory of the Modern Stage, ed. Eric Bentley (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) 230-231.

20 A.C. Scott, The Classical Theatre of China (New York: Barnes & Noble Inc., 1957) 142.

21 Gao Xingjian, "Tan xiandai xiju shouduan" (A Discussion of Modern Theatrical Techniques), Shuibi (1983) Vol. I 119.

22 Gao Xingjian, "Yao shemeyain de xiju" (What Kind of Theatre Do We Need), Literature and Arts Studies (1986) Vol. IV 89.

23 Gao Xingjian, The Wildman, A Collection of Gao Xingjian's Dramas (Gao Xingjian xijuji) (Beijing Masses Press [Qunzhong chubanshe], 1985) 270.

24 Gao Xingjian, "Wode xijuguan" (My Opinion About Theatre), in A Collection of Gao Xingjian's Dramas, 278.

25 Gao Xingjian, "What Kind of Theatre Do We Need" 88.

26 Ibid.

CHAPTER III

ORIENTAL INFLUENCES ON WESTERN AVANT GARDE PLAYWRIGHTS SERVED AS SOURCES OF INSPIRATION FOR GAO XINGJIAN

Western spoken drama was introduced to China at a time when young Chinese intellectuals were looking for new ways to modernize culture and society. The realistic spoken drama was quite different from the traditional Chinese theatre, but it was very appealing to the young intellectuals at the time because its realistic nature made it an appropriate medium to advocate social reform. After eighty years of development, the spoken drama evolved into the most popular form of theatre in China, but for political reasons it remained confined within the realistic realm. In communist ideology, socialist realism is recognized as the only method to create works in literature and theatre, because it best serves the party's propaganda needs. Some Chinese dramatists in the sixties attempted to introduce Brecht's epic theatre to the Chinese audience, but the experiments were condemned during the Cultural Revolution.[1] Only the orthodox dogmas of the Stanislavsky school were recognized in spoken drama since 1949. The Chinese government initiated modernization in the late seventies, when some writers in China began to look for new directions to invigorate the then stagnant state of literature and theatre. Introductory articles and translations of modern Western literature and theatre appeared in various newspapers and magazines. Since spoken drama was originally introduced from the West, it was natural for the Chinese dramatists to turn to the West for new directions.

As a contemporary playwright, Gao Xingjian is one of the few writers familiar with both Chinese and Western literature, especially the Western theatrical traditions. As mentioned before, Gao Xingjian went to a French language institute to study French language and literature where he developed profound interest in the works of modern playwrights and it was to his benefit that most of the *avant-garde* dramatists wrote in French. (English and Russian are otherwise the best known

Western languages in China.) His background in French language and culture not only prepared him to understand the innovations in Western theatre, but he was also better able to comprehend the socio-cultural background from which the modern Western theatre evolved to carry out similar experimentations in Chinese contents. Geremie Barmé considers Gao Xingjian as "the first member of the middle-aged generation of Chinese writers to be capable of such experimentation."[2]

When realistic theatre was introduced in China at the beginning of this century, more and more dramatists in the West were finding that it was not capable of dealing with the complex inner world of modern man. John Gassner clarified this point in his book The Theatre in Our Time:

> For plumbing the depths of the individual psyche, realism was of little avail because the realistic technique, with its "fourth-wall" convention and its absence of poetic dialogue and soliloquy, could present our experience and feeling on only one plane: it could let audiences see only the surfaces that any outsider sees. Realistic drama is preeminently logical, but the inner world self is not logical.[3]

Dissatisfied with the narrowness of realistic theatre, the Western twentieth century dramatists and theatre artists explored various sources for new ideas. Oriental theatrical styles, including those of the traditional Chinese theatre, became a popular source for experimentations. The unrealistic nature and the acting techniques of the traditional Chinese theatre and other Oriental theatres attracted many Western dramatists, ultimately having a strong impact on the development of contemporary Western theatre. Clara Yü Cuadrado made the following comment:

> Any student of modern Western theatre knows the significance of the ritualistic frenzy of Artaud, the *avant-garde* experiments of Cocteau and Barrault, the festive magic of Reinhardt, the candid theatricality of Vakhtangov, the popular theatre of Tennessee Williams, the grotesque drama of Genet, the collective improvisation of the Living Theatre, the strictly player-oriented "poor theatre" of Jerzy Grotowsky, and of course, the "epic theatre" of Bertolt Brecht. Collectively, these forms and styles have made contemporary Western theatre what it is today, yet it is little known that all the above-mentioned theatre artists, theorists and playwrights have been influenced by the classical Chinese theatre.[4]

The pioneers of theatrical reform in the West have successfully blended Oriental theatrical techniques into their experiments and made them a part of Western dramatic convention. Antonin

Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett are the vanguards of theatre reform. Their theatrical theories and practices have influenced the development of Western contemporary theatre. They are also the four sources of inspiration for Gao Xingjian's theatrical innovations. Martin Esslin included these playwrights in his remarkable book The Theatre of the Absurd and regarded them as the founders of modern theatre.[5] The Theatre of the Absurd, though it is known for its theme of nothingness, provides a new form of expression which renounces arguments as a method to present a theme. Most absurdist playwrights have intended to present their themes through concrete stage images. According to Robert W. Corrigan, for example, the most significant element of the Theatre of the Absurd is the emphasis on gesture.[6] Gesture was no longer a decorative addition that accompanied words; rather, it was the source, the course, and the director of language. The element of language still plays an important part in absurd plays, except that what happens on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters. The insistence on restoring gestures to stage performances has resulted in the renascence of pantomime in many plays by the absurd playwrights. Gestures and concrete stage images, have always been the basic ingredients of the traditional Chinese theatre.

The Western dramatists' successes in combining the Western craft with that of the East has greatly encouraged Gao to experiment on his own by intertwining the traditional Chinese theatre with the Western style of spoken drama. Because the Western *avant-garde* theatre was influenced by the traditional Chinese theatre, and Gao, in turn, was influenced by the Western *avant-garde* dramatists' experiments, it is necessary to outline some Oriental influences on *avant-garde* dramatists. Since this thesis is not an exhaustive study of *avant-garde* theatre, only those four playwrights have been reviewed here who have been frequently quoted and referred to by Gao.

1.0. Bertolt Brecht

Of all those who have been under Chinese influence, Bertolt Brecht is the one who deserves the most attention. He is one of the most brilliant poets and dramatists of this century. Through his experiments in combining the Chinese theatrical techniques with the Western stage-craft, he has demonstrated how a synthesis of theatrical art of the East and the West can be achieved.

The impact of Chinese philosophy, poetry and theatre upon Brecht's works is obvious. Studies have shown that Brecht was interested in the teachings of Confucius, Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu, Mo-tzu, as well as those of Mao Tse-tung. He was fascinated by the poetry of Li Bai and Bai Juyi.[7] Many of his works have Chinese settings.[8] But the most important affinity was created between Brecht's dramaturgy and the traditional Chinese theatre.

A key term of Brechtian theatre, the 'alienation effect,' first appeared in an essay written after Brecht saw a Chinese show in Moscow.[9] In his essay, "The Alienation Effect in Chinese Acting," Brecht contrasted the Western actor, who would do all he could to bring his spectators into the closest proximity to the events and characters, to a Chinese actor who always kept himself distant from his character and the spectators.[10] Brecht found his ideal "alienation effect" in traditional Chinese acting:

> Traditional Chinese acting also knows the alienation effect, and applies it most subtly. It is well known that the Chinese theatre uses a lot of symbols. ... Characters are disguised by particular masks, i.e., by simply painting. Certain gestures of the two hands signify the forcible opening of a door, etc. ... All this has long been known, and cannot very well be exported.[11]

Even though Brecht knew that it would be difficult for modern European theatre to borrow from and assimilate traditional Chinese theatre, he still managed to successfully adopt certain traditional Chinese theatrical techniques into his epic theatre, such as symbolic gestures, free movement of time and space, as well as the bare stage with uniform lighting. For Brecht, all these devices were used to create the alienation effect. Brecht wanted to constantly remind his audience that they were in a theatre and they were witnessing only performances. He believed that such techniques would alienate the spectator from the performances so that they could reflect upon the events and judge for themselves on what they had seen.

In traditional Chinese theatre, on the contrary, all these devices were used only to produce best aesthetic effects. An actor's performance was dedicated to the centre of the stage and anything else was not important. Brecht's alienation methods shared certain characteristics with Chinese acting skills but they were not identical in their principles. The Chinese theatre is an art form in which adherence to the established codes is always manifested, even during displays of emotions and in giving moral lessons. A spectator's primary reason for going to the theatre lies in his enjoyment of excellent acting and singing. The Chinese audience has more or less the same habit that Brecht tried to overcome: to feel empathy with the play. Brecht has incorporated some artistic principles of the Chinese theatre into the European drama and set a new trend in Western dramatic circle. Leonard C. Pronko pointed out,

> To use Oriental theatricalism need not result in slavish imitation, quaintness, or superficiality. Brecht has given us an example of what can be done when a strong, vigorous, independent mind comes into contact with what is apparently a foreign tradition. He has made it his own by adapting Oriental devices to his own purpose, or by arriving at similar devices through his own search and meditation.[12]

2.0. Antonin Artaud

Antonin Artaud was one of the pioneers of theatrical reform who believed traditional Western theatre was "a theatre of idiots, madmen, inverts, grammarians, grocers, antipoets and positivists, i.e., occidentals."[13] "The techniques and masks of the Chinese and Balinese theatre obsessed him very early," claims one of his biographers, Jean Hort. "Having read a great deal about them, and remembering not a little, he spoke of them constantly."[14] Artaud was seeking a total theatre, which "makes use of everything -- gestures, sounds, words, screams, light, darkness,"[15] and he found the ideal concept of a theatre through his contact with Balinese theatre. Instead of regarding the theatrical environment as an extension of mere dialogue, we should, Artaud forcefully argued, reverse that order of priority.[16] Through a spectacle, employing all the means at its disposal, the Balinese theatre "suggests, and enacts the themes of pure theatre upon which the stage performance confers an intense equilibrium, a wholly materialized gravity."[17]

The ideal theatre for Artaud, was first of all an art of performance. He sought to recreate the Western theatre, "to break through language in order to touch life."[18] The "life" in Artaud's theatre is not an imitation of reality as shown in the naturalistic theatre. "We are not referring to life as we know it from its surface of fact, but to that fragile fluctuating centre which forms never reach."[19] Artaud was strongly against the idea of considering drama as part of literature. Theatre, he declared, should have its own language which can incorporate acting but may not need the verbal language of written texts. Artaud admitted that there is a function for words in the theatrical performances, but that function, he insisted, must be redefined. We should not lose our ability to conceive theatre which is divorced from literature.[20] Through the language, which takes on a new presence, and through the movements of the actors, Artaud intended to create "a natural poetry of space."[21] This theatre, like the Oriental theatre, would not deal with the external aspects of things on a single level, or try to resolve the social and psychological conflicts of contemporary man. Through the performances based on non-verbal elements, the theatre was to "express objectively certain secret truths, to bring into the light of day by means of active gestures certain aspects of truth that have been buried."[22] No longer serving only to illustrate what was already manifested, the performances invited exploration of its potential. The theatre presented a world of its own with a language of its own.

Artaud's idea of theatre, although it is based on the Balinese theatre, has close resemblance to the traditional Chinese theatre. The traditional Chinese theatre is known for its unrealistic tradition and the actor's skillful performances are always as important as the verbal message they send to the audience.

3.0. Jean Genet

Gao Xingjian considered Genet as "the only one who can be seen as the innovator of theatrical art".[23] Genet, Artaud and Brecht shared the same admiration for the theatres of the Far East and the same wariness with regard to Western dramatic art. In the 1954 edition of The Maid, Genet published a preface-letter, in which he spoke of his fascination with Oriental theatre and how it had exercised his imagination:

> What I have been told about Japanese, Chinese, and Balinese revels and the perhaps magnified idea that persists in my brain, make the formula of the Western theatre seems to me too coarse.[24]

Indirect contact with the Oriental theatre shaped Genet's dreams of a new theatre which would be "an art that would be a profound web of active symbols capable of speaking to the audience, a language in which nothing is said but everything portended."[25] This idea recalls Artaud's opinions on theatrical language. Genet wanted his actors "to become a sign charged with signs".[26] The actor, according to Genet, should never cease to declare his presence. It is neither a character copied from life, nor his own body which he shows on the stage; it is a collection of masks and shams, a perpetual illusion.[27] (This echoes Brecht's A-effect.) In the five plays he wrote, Genet constantly made efforts to realize his dream. He was not satisfied with his first two plays: Death Watch and The Maids. He attempted to "effect a displacement that, in permitting a declamatory tone, would bring theatre into the theatre."[28] He wanted to invent "a tone of voice, a gait, a gesticulation."[29]

In 1955, Genet happened to witness the performances of Peking Opera in Paris, and was very excited to see a living example of his theatrical dream. In a letter (January, 1963) he wrote:

> I was very impressed. As for its influence on me, it would be very difficult for me to distinguish it from my own preoccupations. At any rate, the extreme tenuousness (I mean subtleties) of the theme, of the constructions, of the modes of interpretation, of the Peking theatre interest me greatly.[30]

Apparently, this experience had a notable impact on Genet's works. His last three plays written after 1955, have an obvious affinity with the Chinese theatre. Some studies show that there is a sharp difference between the visual simplicity of Death Watch and The Maids and the richness of later plays like The Balcony, The Blacks and The Screens.[31]

In the last three plays the audience witnesses the appearance of bare stage, painted faces, exaggerated costumes, music: the techniques most used in Peking Opera. Simple decors are used to establish the stage as a purely theatrical milieu. In the scenes the decor is created from screens rolled on and off the stage as needed. The setting is changed before the eyes of the audience as in the traditional Chinese theatre. Costumes and make up also recall the theatricalism of the Chinese Opera by their sumptuousness, violence, and brightness. Resemblance with this tradition can also be seen in Genet's description of a character in The Screens.[32]

Some scenes in The Screens also suggest the indebtedness to the Peking Opera. As in the Chinese play, night scenes are presented in bright stage and light and darkness is indicated by the actor's movements.[33] By using the Chinese theatrical techniques, Genet not only gives back to the actors the central role in the play, but also stimulates the audience's imagination. Like Brecht, Genet has appropriated the Chinese theatricality and made it his own, transforming its devices in a way that is meaningful and effective within the framework of Western drama. The works of Brecht and Genet suggest that the trap of quaintness and picturesqueness can be avoided and "the Chinese" feature, actually universal in itself, can be transformed to meet different needs.

4.0. Samuel Beckett

Samuel Beckett is recognized as one of the most important dramatists of this century. Among all four playwrights discussed here, Beckett is the only one who has no contact with Oriental theatre. Beckett said: "I am not at all well acquainted with Noh drama or oriental theatre in general and I have made no attempt to use such techniques in my plays."[34]

However, as the most important writer of the Theatre of the Absurd, Beckett has also incorporated into his plays certain elements presented in Artaud's and Brecht's theories and in Genet's practice. Beckett's plays all lack plots. Instead of linear development, Beckett's works present dilemmas of the human condition by a method that is essentially polyphonic. By using verbal nonsense, clowning, symbolized gestures, stylized movement, Beckett creates a pure theatre which turns away from language as an instrument for the expression of the deepest levels of meaning.[35] Like other dramatists of his time, Beckett has paid special attention to theatricality. Beckett usually provides incredibly detailed stage directions which sometimes make up half of the text.[36] Beckett himself compares stage performances to music and emphasizes the stylized movements. In a comment on one of the performances in which he collaborated, he said:

> Producers don't seem to have any sense of form in movement. The kind of form one finds in music, for instance, where themes keep recurring. When, in a text, actions are repeated, they ought to be made unusual the first time, so that when they happen again -- in exactly the same way --an audience will recognize them from before. In the revival of Godot [in Paris] I tried to get at something of that stylized movement that is in the play.[37]

Beckett is clearly more concerned about formal structure than about creating an illusion of everyday reality. Music is after all the most abstract, most formal and the least referential of all arts. Beckett seems to have a desire to do away with normal referential meanings, though he deals with words which inevitably come charged with a whole set of referential contexts. In Endgame, the character Hamm declares to abolish meaning along with everything else. When working on a play for German television, Beckett once explained that he wanted the play to have "no name, and no dialogue, no words. ... It's all movement, activity, percussion, cohesion."[38] This idea reminds us of Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" and Balinese theatre, in which language is secondary to the physical movement. However, in most of Beckett's plays dialogue is still the main media, though the author pays more attention to sound effects rather than to meanings of dialogues. In a letter he made the following comment: "My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else."[39]

In his study of Theatre East and West Leonard C. Pronko suggests the parallel relationship between Beckett's plays and that of the Japanese Noh drama. He points out that by using ritual rhythms, gestures, word patterns, and images, Beckett has succeeded in establishing a dynamic rapport with Eastern tradition. Leonard Pronko points out that the concept of symbol in Beckett's plays is carried in physical forms rather than in words-- gestures, sounds, and objects, which represent some deeper, perhaps more universal reality.

> Like the Noh actor, Beckett's actor must assume a certain degree of stylization, for each movement stands for something beyond itself. ... Like the Noh, Beckett depends for effects largely upon nonverbal elements in the theatre.[40]

The grotesque parody of the function of language seems to be an extreme example of what Beckett has attempted to do all the time, as he turns his ears to "the fundamental sounds," refusing to project language more than is absolutely necessary into the reality it might represent. His characters talk, fearful of the void that would be revealed by their silence, but there is no real communication. Beckett sends his message to the audience not through communication among the characters, but through contradictory and symbolic movement on the stage. The poetry and meanings in his plays emerge from the concrete and objectified images on the stage itself.

5.0. The Sources of Inspiration for Gao Xingjian

Gao Xingjian has benefitted from the experiments of the four dramatists discussed here. He has attempted to selectively learn from them so as to form his own ideas of a new theatre; just as three of the four Western masters have selectively learned from Oriental theatres for their own purposes. In his attempts to innovate the Chinese spoken drama, Gao found that the *avant- garde* dramatists provided him with a broad base of new theatrical devices. Their successes inspire him to study more the Chinese theatrical heritage and to create a theatre of his own.

Gao Xingjian thinks that Brecht has opened a new path for theatrical art by introducing narration and songs in spoken drama.[41] He remarks that the term 'epic theatre' does not represent the characteristics of Brechtian theatre well. The main structure of Brecht's plays is narration, therefore, it will be more proper to call it "narrative theatre."[42] But Gao also points out that narration in drama is not Brecht's invention; it originated with the chorus songs of ancient Greek theatre and it also can be found in the traditional Chinese theatre. In traditional Chinese theatre, there is the 'self-introduction' (zibao jiamen), the 'aside' (pangbai), and the 'choral singing' (bangchang). These devices are incorporated into an overall structure to help introduce the story of the play to the spectators in a direct manner. The narrative devices in traditional Chinese theatre, Gao believes, create direct communication between the actor and the audience and enhance the theatrical effect of the performance. When an actor becomes a narrator, he talks directly to the audience. These devices in traditional Chinese theatre make it possible for the characters in the play to pause and step aside to assume the role of a narrator. By introducing narration into his plays, Brecht required his actor to act like a third person, telling a story to the audience. Brecht put emphasis on detaching the actor from the character in order to create the 'alienation effect.' Gao Xingjian, however, is not so much concerned with the alienation effect. He is not against the actor transferring himself into the character when he is acting. A good actor, Gao believes, should be able to transfer himself into the character, but also be able to step aside when it is necessary. In some of Gao's plays, the audience experiences the direct communication with the actor. The actor sometimes steps aside to assume the role of a narrator and talks directly to the audience as in traditional Chinese theatre. The direct communication between the actors and the audience is the goal Artaud set for his theatre.

Both Artaud and Gao believe that, as a priority, a theatre should consider the effect of the performance. In order to attain the best theatrical effect, the performance should make use of all available means, including sound, lights, masks, costumes, etc., and direct communication should be established between the actor and the spectators. Gao Xingjian shares the idea with Artaud that drama should not be treated as a branch of literature. Drama is first of all, Gao argues, a performing art.[43] But drama also differs from other performing arts, such as dancing and acrobatics because drama creates theatricality. Traditionally, a play is supposed to present a complete story. Modern drama does not follow the same rule. To reflect the life of modern society, Gao says, modern theatre does not have to follow Ibsen's style. A play does not have to present a story. It can be a happening, a contradiction, a discovery or a surprise. Gao sees the proof of his idea in the Theatre of the Absurd:

> Absurd dramatists create surprise and discovery instead of suspense, plot and conflict to achieve theatricality.... The appearance of 'Anti-theatre' did not abolish theatre, it instead has enriched the devices of modern theatrical performances.[44]

A play can describe a complex story, it also can depict an event or a character's emotions or feelings as in some of the traditional Chinese plays.[45] Gao Xingjian agrees with Artaud that theatre should create a language of its own which includes music, gesture and other theatrical means. But Gao does not agree with Artaud that theatre should renounce the role of text and the writer. Instead, Gao suggests that a good playwright should always have the stage in his mind when he writes a play. A good playwright does not only write a play, but also designs the performances of his play.

Gao Xingjian remarks that all of Genet's plays are written for theatrical performances and hopes he could do the same. Like Genet, Gao always adds detailed suggestions for the performances of his plays. In those suggestions, Gao not only explains the stage requirements, but also makes detailed suggestions for the design of setting, lights, as well as the costumes and acting techniques. Gao Xingjian shares many principles of theatricality with Genet. Genet once quoted a story of six youngsters playing a game of war in a park. He described how the youngsters easily played different roles in the game and suggested that "it is on the basis of this formula that a theatre can thrill me".[46]

Gao Xingjian also wishes to create similar childlike creativity in theatre. He mentions that theatre is a place where the actor and the audience play games together. The actor and the audience both have to discover their childlike imaginations to create the best theatrical effect. In order to create theatrical effect, both Gao and Genet have employed masks in their plays. In one of his essays, Gao even proposes that the actor and the audience both wear masks.[47] This idea echoes Genet's suggestion for the performance of his play The Blacks, in which Genet clearly stipulated that the play was written for the white audiences. If the play was performed before a black audience, Genet proposed, "let masks be distributed at the door to the black spectators."[48] By utilizing masks and heavy make-up, Genet attempted to convey the feeling that impersonation and playfulness were at the heart of a theatre. This idea is fully accepted by Gao Xingjian. Gao's latest play, On the Other Side of the River opens with the actors playing with a rope. Genet suggested in his last play, The Screens, that the play be performed out-of-doors.[49] Gao also suggests that it would be better to stage his play On the Other Side of the River in an open-air theatre.

Gao Xingjian respects Beckett as a great dramatist who is a master of language. Unlike most Chinese critics in the early eighties, Gao praised Beckett and his play Waiting for Godot in 1981. He says,

> After World War II, Beckett, the representative figure of the *avant-garde*, wrote a modern tragedy Waiting for Godot that shocked the Western world. ... It represents Beckett's observation of the modern society, or to put it another way, it is the artistic condensation of his world outlook. His audience and readers can freely draw their own conclusions from this abstract figure. ... Here we have to admit that in artistic presentation, the playwright's technique is outstanding. We may call the method employed by Beckett to portray the figure of Godot a method of abstraction. ... Taken as a whole, the play is both utterly absurd and, on closer reflection, surprisingly profound.[50]

Although Gao Xingjian may not accept Beckett's world outlook, he appreciates Beckett's method of abstraction and has tried to adopt some of Beckett's techniques into his plays. Like Beckett, Gao Xingjian has been searching for the music structure for theatrical language and symbolic movements in stage performances.

Based on Chinese theatrical traditions and by taking into consideration the Western *avant-garde* theatrical experiments, Gao Xingjian has formed his own theatrical theories and has produced some interesting plays. He has also made efforts to utilize modern technology, such as lighting and sound systems on stage to enhance effects. Gao's plays bear resemblance to some of the dramas produced by the four playwrights but with Chinese contents. The Wildman perhaps is the best example. Gao Xingjian calls this play a polyphonic modern epic, which combines the polyphonic method of Beckett and the epic theatre of Brecht. Like Brecht's epic theatre, Gao has employed singing, dancing and narration in the play. But unlike the epic theatre which is staged under a uniform light, Gao employs lighting and sound systems to indicate changes of time and space. The play, in fact, incorporates many qualities the author has learnt from the four Western masters. Gao Xingjian's emphasis on distinctive visual images reflects Genet's idea of theatre as a visible world.[51] The wood-carved masks remind us of the masks used in Genet's plays. Although the actor's movements on stage is the focus of the play, the language still plays an important role. Gao also attempts to create musical effects through multi-level dialogues. Several characters talk at the same time and at different volumes of sound. This method creates a sound effect analogous to Beckett's plays where the sound is more important than the meaning of the sentences. Gao's intentions in The Wildman are indicated in his suggestions attached to the stage direction of the play, which echoes Artaud's idea of an absolute theatre:

> Theatre needs to regain many techniques it has been losing for more than a century. This play is an attempt for the modern drama to return to the traditional concept of music drama [*xiqu*]. That is to say the play will not merely depend on the art of language, but intend to use various musical dramatic techniques such as singing, narrating, acting and acrobatics, etc. . ... This play can be seen as a complete drama.
>
> The director and stage designer should make use of all the space in the theatre and not be limited by the stage. The play is performed in the theatre, therefore, the theatre should be made a place where the actors meet the audience, allowing the audience a maximal participation in the performance.[52]

In spite of the devices borrowed from Western theatre, The Wildman has a clear Chinese flavour by utilizing Chinese folk songs and music as well as local costumes and the wood-carved sorcery masks from the province of Guizhou. Like Beckett's Waiting for Godot, which shocked the Western world when it was first staged in the early fifties, Gao's plays shocked the Chinese audience when they were first staged. The Wildman has won applause from some critics, but has also received criticism. Gao Xingjian believes that in modern times the theatre needs to be innovative in order to survive. He says: "As an old art form, the theatre has been more and more threatened by cinema and television. At the present time, the theatre itself has to find its raison d'être."[53]

Gao Xingjian realizes that an example of an ideal prototype theatre does not exist. He believes that Stanislavsky is a great theatrical artist but his theories and practices should not be the only example to follow. The Chinese dramatists should produce plays that are Chinese by incorporating various traditional Chinese theatrical techniques into their works and yet avoid superficial resemblance with the traditional Chinese theatre.[54]

Gao has set his goal to establish an absolute theatre, in which the potentials of theatrical arts will be fully developed, whether this theatre is Oriental or of Western origin. To maintain the Chinese national character, Gao argues, it is not necessary that one should refrain from adopting modern techniques from Western theatres. Writers in the early twenties learned from the new form of theatre from the West and made it part of Chinese theatre so as to describe the Chinese society. It is necessary now for the new generation to learn new techniques from the West and use them to depict today's society. Gao's ideas of a theatre echoes what John Gassner once said about the modern theatre: "The future of our stage depends greatly upon the possibility of turning the present chaotic coexistence of realistic and non-realist stylization into an active and secure partnership.[55]

The Bus-stop can be seen as a starting point of Gao Xingjian's theatrical experimentations. Although it is not his best work and it does not incorporate all aspects of his ideas of a new theatre, it is one of his most controversial plays. It is often seen as a representation of Chinese modernism due to the absurd devices used in the play and its resemblance to Beckett's Waiting for Godot. The next chapter will examine and compare The Bus-stop with Waiting for Godot.

Notes

1 Chinese dramatist Huang Zuolin started experimentation with epic theatre in the early sixties. Coorperating with other dramatists, Huang not only staged Brecht's Mother Courage in 1959, he also directed some of his own epic drama dealing with contemporary Chinese themes. His experimentation were severely attacked even before the Cultural Revolution. The experimentation of epic theatre rallied its forces again after the Cultural Revolution. Brecht's Life of Galileo was staged in Beijing in 1978. See Adrian Hsia "Reception of Brecht in China", in Brecht and East Asian Theatre, ed. by Antony Tatlow and Tak-wai Wong (Hongkong: Hongkong University Press, 1982) 29-45.

2 Gerēmie Barmé, Renditions (1983) 377.

3 John Gassner, The Theatre in Our Time (New York: Crown, 1966) 16.

4 Clara Yü Cuadrado, "Cross-culture Currents in the Theatre: China and the West," China and the West: Comparative Literature Studies eds. William Tay, Ying-hsiung Chou and Heh-hsiang Yuan (Hongkong: The Chinese University Press, 1980) 227-228.

5 Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (New York: Penguin Books Ltd, 1980) 327-399.

6 Robert W. Corrigan, "The Theatre in Search of a Fix," Theatre in the Twentieth Century, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1963) 21.

7 Reneta Berg-Pan, Bertolt Brecht and China (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1979) 110-138.

8 Ibid. 181-217.

9 On his manuscript Brecht wrote the following note in pencil: "This essay arose out of a performance by Mei Lanfang's company in Moscow in Spring, 1935." See John Willett, ed. and trans. Brecht on Theatre (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964) 97.

10 Ibid. 93.

11 Ibid. 91.

12 Leonard Cabell Pronko, Theatre East and West: Perspectives Toward a Total Theatre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) 60-61.

13 Antonin Artaud, The Theatre and Its Double (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1958) 41.

14 Jean Hort, Antonin Artaud: Le suicidé de la société (Geneva: Éditions Connaître, 1960) 28.

15 Artaud, The Theatre and Its Double 12.

16 Ibid. 46.

17 Ibid. 65.

18 Ibid. 13.

19 Ibid. 13.

20 Ibid. 46.

21 Ibid. 72.

22 Ibid. 70.

23 Gao Xingjian, "In the Pursuit of a Modern Theatre," published in Da Gong Daily (Hongkong, July 2, 1987).

24 Jean Genet, "A Note on Theatre," Tulane Drama Review (Spring, 1963) 37.

25 Ibid. 37.

26 Ibid. 37.

27 Ibid. 38.

28 Ibid. 38.

29 Ibid. 38.

30 Quoted from Pronko's Theatre East and West 65.

31 See Pronko, Theatre East and West; Peter Brooks and Joseph Halpern ed., Genet: A Collection of Critical Essays (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979); Lewis T. Cetta, Profane Play, Ritual, and Genet (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1974).

32 Jean Genet, The Screens, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1962).

33 Ibid. 17.

34 Quoted from Pronko, Theatre East and West 106.

35 See Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd 402-406.

36 See Jan Kott, The Theatre of Essence (Evanston: Northwestern U.P, 1984) 135.

37 Quoted from Charles Marowitz, "Paris Log," Encore Mar/April (1962):44

38 Interview with Maeve Binchy, Irish Times, (14.5 80). Quoted from J. P. Little, En attendant Godot and Fin de partie (London: Grant & Cutler Ltd., 1981) 42.

39 Wolf, Daniel & Edwin Fancher, ed., "Beckett's letters on **Endgame**," The Village Voice Reader (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

40 Pronko, Theatre East and West 110.

41 Gao Xingjian, "Lunxijuxing" (On Theatricality), Shuibi, Vol. 4 (1983) 118.

42 Ibid. 118.

43 Ibid.

44 Gao Xingjian, "Dongzhuo yu guocheng" (Action and Process) Shuibi, Vol. 5 (1983) 108-109.

45 Ibid. 120.

46 Jean Genet, "A Note On Theatre," Tulane Drama Review (Spring, 1963) 41.

47 Gao Xingjian, "What Kind of Theatre Do We Need?" (Yao shenmeyan de xiju), Literaure and Art Studies (Wenyi yanjiu) (April, 1986) 89.

48 Genet, The Blacks 4.

49 Jean Genet, Les Paravents (Décines, 1961) 9.

50 Gao Xingjian, A Preliminary Discussion of Contemporary Narrative Techniques, quoted in "Critiques of The Bus-stop," Renditions (1983) 390-400.

51 Genet, "A Note On Theatre," 38.

52 Gao Xingjian, The Wildman, A Collection of Gao Xingjian's Dramas 272-273.

53 Gao Xingjian, "My Opinion About Theatre," A Collection of Gao Xingjian's Dramas 275.

54 Ibid. 276.

55 John Gassner, Form and Idea in the Modern Theatre (New York: Dryden, 1956) viii.

CHAPTER IV

THE BUS-STOP AND *WAITING FOR GODOT*: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

1.0 Background:

The Bus-stop was Gao Xingjian's second experiment in theatrical innovation. This play has been chosen for the analysis because, as noted earlier, it is one of Gao's most controversial plays and because it introduced to the Chinese audience for the first time certain new devices of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Any analysis of The Bus-stop inevitably leads to a comparison with Waiting for Godot because of similarities of themes, techniques, etc. The similarities can be found even in the criticisms the two plays received when they were first staged and in their subsequent recognition as breakthroughs in the modern theatrical reforms in the West and in China. Waiting for Godot received an enthusiastic response when it was first staged in Paris, in January of 1953, even though it was shocking to the French audience because of its unconventional style. The American production, however, was not as successful. When Waiting for Godot was performed in Miami in 1956, a large segment of the audience left in disgust before the curtain rose for act two. Some American critics at the time described the play as a bundle of paradoxes.[1] The Bus-stop was staged in Beijing in June of 1983 and was considered to be the first experiment in the Theatre of the Absurd in China. Even though the play was well received by the Chinese audience as a brave new experiment in spoken drama, it was heavily criticized by the government critics.

One article even compared the time when The Bus-stop and Waiting for Godot were first staged[2]: Waiting for Godot was staged in 1953, seven years after the Second World War; and The Bus-stop was first performed in 1983, seven years after the Cultural Revolution. Government critics in China condemned The Bus-stop because they disliked the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd and because they considered The Bus-stop an imitation of Beckett's best play which presented a nihilistic world outlook. The similarities in style, techniques, etc., will be noted and while the theme of the plays are similar, this chapter will try to demonstrate that the two playwrights have presented different ideologies and world views. For Beckett in Waiting for Godot, the world is meaningless and absurd; his characters wait for something indefinitely. Gao Xingjian, on the other hand, encourages his audience to look for the meaning in life through one's own efforts, instead of passive waiting. References to Gao's adaptations of the elements of traditional Chinese theatre will also be made, although in The Bus-stop most adaptations are from the Western modern theatre. It may be added that all quotations from The Bus-stop in this chapter have been taken from the Chinese edition of A Collection of Gao Xingjian's Drama (Gao Xingjian xijuji) and unless otherwise indicated, the translations are mine.

To acquaint readers with The Bus-stop, a summary of the play is given below, however, for the purposes of the analysis and comparison in this chapter, it is assumed that the reader is familiar with Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot. It should also be noted that it is not the purpose of the comparison in this chapter to judge which play is superior, either in the overall assessment or the commentary on a specific element. Beckett's Waiting for Godot is a masterpiece and the author's genius in the play is widely recognized. The purpose of the analysis in this chapter, therefore, is to simply identify and interpret the similarities and the differences by discussing various aspects of both plays. It is hoped that through such discussions the reader will also become well acquainted with the contents and substance of The Bus-stop.

2.0 *The Bus-stop*: A Summary:

The Bus-stop is a play about waiting for a bus. Eight characters, from a variety of suburbs, come to a bus-stop on a Saturday afternoon, intending to catch a bus to go to the city for different reasons. An avuncular Old Man is looking forward to a chess game with a famous chess-player at the Cultural Palace. A Rowdy Young Man (he will be referred to as Lout hereafter)[3] wants to spend his wages on a strange new food that he has only heard about - yogurt. A diligent bespectacled student, who is called literally the Person with Glasses in Chinese (hereafter referred to as Glasses) is going to the city to enroll in the university entrance examinations. He is practicing English by mumbling some peculiar sentences such as "Open your books! Open your pigs! ..."[4] A Mother with a job in the local town is off to spend the weekend with her husband and son who live in the city. A Girl, approaching spinsterhood, is going to meet a prospective boyfriend. A Carpenter with traditional skills is invited to teach his trade to a group of young apprentices in the city. Superintendent Ma, the head of a general supplies store, is going to the city to be feted by some of his cronies. A mysteriously Silent Man in the group waits for the bus at the beginning of the play but leaves shortly after. The Silent Man's destination is not announced but everyone in the group assumes that he has gone to the city on foot.

A number of buses, represented by sound recordings and lighting effects, flash past as the people in the group push and shove in order to be the first to board the bus. When none of the buses stop for them, they get into an orderly line in the belief that this will bring the next bus to a halt. Again a bus passes without stopping. The play continues in a light, semifarcical and naturalistic mood until the young student reminds his fellow travellers that ten years have passed by. Ill tempered recriminations and selfish jostlings turn into panic and fear. Will any bus ever stop for them? They begin to realize that the Silent Man had left them a long time ago and by now they also would have been in the city if they all had followed the Silent Man. Lout cries that he would have been able to crawl to the city by now if he had not waited.

Everyone is caught in the dilemma whether to walk to the city now or to continue waiting. They want to go, but the thought that the bus could arrive the moment they leave prevents them from walking to the city. The years, like all those buses, pass by as they squabble, sigh over the lost opportunities and dream about a future that has disappeared with the lost time. They lose themselves intermittently in conversations related to change, growth, decay and death, yet their topics always revert to the question of whether or not they should walk to the city. It starts to rain. They huddle together under a large sheet of plastic to keep themselves dry. When the rain stops, the seven characters split into small groups to discuss their predicament with each other and with the audience.

One of them suddenly finds a faded poster on a pole by the bus-stop. The poster is barely legible and they guess that it is an announcement cancelling this bus-stop. No bus will stop for them. A casual Saturday afternoon outing has now turned into a nightmare. A special musical theme, representing the Silent Man, is repeated in the background and the people in the group finally realize that like the Silent Man, they all must now take charge of their own lives. The young student cries out: "Time is not a bus-stop...life is not a bus-stop.... Let's move, we've said everything that can be said... come on!" (132) People echo his call and help each other to get started. Just at the moment when everyone is ready to leave, Superintendent Ma asks the group to wait for a while: he has to tie his shoe-lace. The play ends.

The subtitle of the play Multiple-voiced Life-like One-act Lyric Comedy (Doshengbu dumu shenghuo shuqing xiju) suggests the main techniques used in the play. This four-hour play is designed for presentation in a theatre-in-the-round stage without separation of acts. The play utilizes the new theatrical devices of multiple soliloquy, directly addresses to the audience, and employs modern sound and lighting systems. By employing these new devices the author intends to break down the "fourth wall" that had separated the audience from the stage in the past.[5] The play does not have a clearly developed plot, but the theme of the play still follows the tradition of Ibsen or the Chinese spoken drama which is basically realistic and didactic.

The Bus-stop is a social play. It comments on and satirizes social problems in contemporary

China. The characters are representations of specific types of people in Chinese society. The dialogue is lively, fast-moving and colloquial. The author shows his command of language by creating different styles of speech to suit the character of the person uttering it. Gao Xingjian has tried to convince his audience that everyone has the ability to master his or her life. Waiting is a dreadful situation. One has to get out of it in order to move on in life. This lesson may also apply to groups and perhaps even to society as whole. Although The Bus-stop presents an absurd situation, it is still a realistic play. The absurd situation mostly serves as a satire and a message for those who do not utilize their time properly.

3.0 Comparative Analysis: *The Bus-stop* and *Waiting for Godot*

The analyses and exegeses of The Bus-stop in the following pages are presented under the headings of "Theme and Characters," "Language and Communication" and "Time and Space".

Even though the principal theme in The Bus-stop and Waiting for Godot is waiting, differences in the meaning of waiting and the characters' interactions in the plays reveal the fundamental differences in the philosophical thinking of the two playwrights. The second part of this analysis examines the techniques utilized in the two plays to expand the medium of theatrical communication beyond language, because dialogue is no longer considered to be the sole medium of communication in a modern play. Music and narration, for example, have been introduced into the communication medium of plays since the beginning of this century. In the third part, the concepts of time and space will be examined. Time has always been a primary concern of a playwright because within a specified period the playwright is expected to present a theme to the audience. The traditions of Western drama, in the past, required adherence to the set rules of time limitations. The two plays discussed here have broken this tradition and presented a new perspective of time and space.

This analysis will also highlight Gao Xingjian's adaptations of certain techniques from

Brechtian theatre and from traditional Chinese theatre. The comparative analysis attempts to indicate how modern dramatic techniques can be utilized to suit different cultures and to present different ideologies.

3.1. Themes and Characters

Waiting has been chosen as the main theme in many plays of the Theatre of the Absurd and even in some existentialist plays. To name a few: Ionesco's The Chairs, The Bald Prima Donna, Beckett's Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Genet's Death Watch, and Sartre's No Exit (Huis Clos). Waiting erases the past and diminishes the present because in waiting one's attention is focused on the hope, on the future one is waiting for. Waiting apparently aggrandizes the future in which the waited for will appear. But that is not always the case. To wait for the future is also to wait for the unknown, and thus to put oneself at risk. Waiting can destroy the present by anticipating the future and it loses all its significance if the future turns into past when one reaches it.

For the characters in the plays of the Theatre of the Absurd the past is better but no more sure or knowable than the future; and the present is unbearably endless. They wait for something or somebody that might never come. They wait only to pass time. "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!"[6] That is the message the absurdist playwrights intend to convey. Waiting, as presented in The Bus-stop, is a bridge that connects the present with the future. But the author also wants to show that waiting does not naturally lead one to the future one is waiting for. In order to reach one's future, one has to make an effort instead of waiting passively.

The main theme and the theatrical structure of The Bus-stop appear to emulate Beckett's Waiting for Godot. However, by comparing the meanings behind the main theme of waiting and by analysing the characters in the two plays, one may find basic differences in the world outlook presented by the two playwrights.

The title of Beckett's play suggests that the characters in the play are waiting for Godot, but through the course of the play the audience learns that Godot is only an ambiguous image who will never appear. Life as portrayed in the play is bleak, sterile and meaningless. The characters talk, play, move or wait only to prove that they exist. ("We always find something, eh, Didi, to give us the impression that we exist" 44a.) Vladimir and Estragon wait for the night, wait for Godot, but in fact, they are "waiting for waiting" (50). Pozzo and Lucky keep on moving, yet with no destination in mind, they simply "move...on!" (31a, 57a). Behind all these meaningless actions, death is the hidden theme, but it is also the very step the characters would never take. The subject of death is alluded to many times in the dialogues. The characters constantly talk about homicide but no decision is ever reached and no action is taken. Life is ennui, but to finish it requires courage which is lacking in Beckett's characters. The environment of the play is a mostly barren wasteland in which just one tree is growing. The audience, as part of the environment, is construed to be a bog in Act I (10a); and is viewed as a charnel-house, full of corpses and skeletons in Act II (41a). As Pierre Aimé Touchard commented: "Beckett condemns life itself which is nothing but a wait without interest, without faith, without love for death. For him, existence is justified in short only by its fatal ending: nothingness."[7]

The characters in Waiting for Godot seem to echo the basic tenet of Existentialism which assumes that the human being is a creature in rebellion against his creator. The more he suffers, feels insecure, and discovers his homelessness in the universe, the more he knows that he exists. Man is aware of nothingness in the world, and this awareness produces dreaded despair. According to the tenet of existentialism, each human being seeks his own individuality and existence through suffering and insecurity.[8] Martin Esslin pointed out: "There is here a truly astonishing parallel between the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and the creative intuition of Beckett, who has never consciously expressed Existentialist views."[9] In Godot the only choice left for Vladimir and Estragon is to wait for Godot. While waiting, the two friends play, sleep, and sing only to prove that they exist. Waiting is a painful journey for them, through which they discover the nothingness in the world. All their lives they have tried everything, only to find "Nothing to be done!" and "Nothing is certain!" (7, 35A)

The author of The Bus-stop puts an end to the prolonged waiting. The title itself, from the perspective of the characters, suggests a defined hope for the audience. If we see people waiting at a bus-stop, we cannot help but assume that they are waiting for a bus which will come soon. People waiting at a bus-stop must have a clear idea about their destination. When waiting in The Bus-stop becomes apparently endless, unlike the characters in Beckett's play, the passengers in The Bus-stop begin to discuss alternatives available to them. They can go back or move forward as long as they make up their minds. Since walking back "along that path in the dead of night is less inviting,[10] they all decide to walk to the city. However, the very thought that the bus may arrive as soon as they leave, prevents them from taking off.

> **Glasses:** What if the bus comes after we leave? ... And if it comes but fails to stop again? Looking at the problem rationally, I know I should start walking; it is just that I'm not one hundred percent sure. What's stopping me is the nagging suspicion that it'll come.(109)

None of the passengers is willing to wait, but they are hindered by the "what- ifs". The author here is satirizing the laziness and the habits of some people who would rather put their hopes on uncertain possibilities, than taking charge of the situation themselves. People sometimes are victims of their own habits. But not like Beckett's characters, who are not able to recognize their senseless positions, the would-be passengers in The Bus-stop ultimately understand their situation and decide to walk to the city. True enough, the play ends with Superintendent Ma calling out for everyone to wait for a moment because he has to tie his shoe-lace. This ending partly resembles the endings in Beckett's Waiting for Godot and Endgame. However, the audience of The Bus- stop has no doubts that these passengers will make a start eventually, because they no longer rest their hopes on uncertainties. The play presents an absurd situation: eight people wait at a bus-stop for over ten years, but no buses ever stop for them. Nevertheless, the theme of the play is not absurd. By setting a contrast of waiting and walking, the playwright creates a didactic theme: Everyone can be the master of his own life, if he makes an effort; and it is never too late to start. The Silent Man decides to leave uncertainties behind and walk to the city at the beginning of the play and his music is repeated thereafter throughout the play as a reminder of his decisiveness. The other passengers are forced to look beyond their petty differences and follow the example of the Silent Man.

By revealing at the end of the play that the bus-stop is no longer in use, Gao Xingjian also wants to convey to his audience that one should never rely on delusions or deceptions. On the contrary, Beckett's Waiting for Godot tries to convince the audience that life is full of delusions and deceptions and that ultimately nothing matters in life. The message of nothingness is conveyed through the characters' personalities, identities, conversations, etc.. Some of these are discussed below.

Although Beckett has given names to his characters, they do not provide full identities as in a realistic play. The characters, Estragon and Vladimir, have several names, depending on the perspective from which they are viewed. They call each other Gogo and Didi in the context of their affectionate friendship. When Pozzo asks Estragon his name, he replies "Adam" (25). On the other hand, the messenger boy addresses Vladimir as "Mister Albert" (32a, 58a). What is more unusual is that the names Vladimir and Estragon never appear in the dialogues of the play. The two other characters, Pozzo and Lucky seem to have fixed names. But Lucky is never addressed by his name and Pozzo fails to respond to his name when Vladimir calls him in Act II; and the position of these two characters seems interchangeable. This ambiguity of personal identity also applies to Godot, who never appears on the stage and yet, Godot is a pivotal character. From the messenger boy the audience knows that he owns sheep, goats and land; he has a white beard and beats his shepherd. However, none of the characters knows exactly who Godot is. It is not even certain whether Godot is the right name. In one exchange between Vladimir and Estragon, Estragon asks Vladimir if the person's name is Godot, to which Vladimir replies that he thinks so (14a). Uncertainty is also manifested in the information related to the characters' age. The audience can never be sure of their age. This aspect will be elaborated in the third part of this discussion under 'time and space.'

The characters' inability to cope with their environment is another recurring theme in Beckett's play. Physical disability is shown in all four main characters. Vladimir suffers pain when he tries to laugh. Estragon stumbles all the time and he suffers from pain in the foot. Lucky is unable to act without an order from Pozzo in Act I, and becomes totally mute in Act II. Pozzo is the only healthy person in Act I, but he becomes blind in Act II. All these characters are mentally deficient.

Lastly, the fallibility of memory, together with the ineffectiveness of reason and senses, leads them into interdependent relationships. The four characters always act in pairs: Vladimir and Estragon; Pozzo and Lucky. Estragon depends on Vladimir for food (carrot, radish), care (comfort, singing), and protection. In return, Vladimir needs Estragon to get rid of his loneliness. (He wakes Estragon from sleep for he feels lonely. 11.) Sometimes they are frustrated and resent each other's company, and yet, they are never able to part. Eva Metman describes this relationship in the following manner: "This uninspired symbiosis seems to display a concept of friendship which Beckett attributes to Proust: he 'situates friendship somewhere between fatigue and ennui'."[11]

The relationship between the other two characters is not quite the same. Pozzo and Lucky seem to represent the relationship between a tyrannical master and a faithful slave. But they are also together for different reasons. In Act I, Pozzo is on his way to a fair to sell Lucky. The thought of separation reduces Lucky to tears (21a). The two become totally dependent on each other in Act II, when Pozzo becomes blind and Lucky mute. They cling to each other for support just like Vladimir and Estragon. Pozzo needs Lucky to lead him and Lucky needs Pozzo's voice to ask for help when they fall down. The physical deterioration of Pozzo and Lucky seems to provide a link between waiting and moving in Beckett's world, which is different from Gao's didactic theme of waiting and walking as noted earlier, where one could control his own life. In Beckett's world those who wait cannot change, but those who move deteriorate. Waiting seems preferable to moving, but what does waiting mean? Or what are they waiting for?

It can be concluded from the above that the characters in Waiting for Godot are abstractions of universal man with no individual identity; they live in a meaningless world and do not know how to cope with it. They have no memory of their past nor do they have the ability to think. No one knows where they come from and where they go. They have no patterns of thought and action and only live in the midst of nothingness. Jerome Ashmore observes: "Beckett leaves man in a state free from delusion, but at the same time in a state which is incoherent and inane."[12]

By contrast, ambiguity is not a dominant theme of The Bus-stop. Although no personal names are given to the eight characters of the play, Gao Xingjian provides other marks of identification: The characters are introduced by age, sex, profession and even by personalities. They know exactly what they are waiting for at the bus-stop. The characters of The Bus-stop are not abstractions but embody characteristics of different social backgrounds they belong to. The middle-aged Silent Man symbolizes the people who believe in self-reliance, those who do not spend time in meaningless waiting but believe in decisiveness and action to attain one's goal. The remaining seven characters of different ages are ordinary people in Chinese society. They wish for a better future, desire to accomplish something in life, but fail to recognize their own potentials to change society and their own lives. They typically follow the life patterns of the main stream of society and hope something will happen someday that will change their lives.

As noted earlier, the characters in Waiting for Godot are preoccupied with trivia: games and among other things, language, suicide, and waiting for Godot. They are bored with their lives, yet not willing or able to do anything to change them. In The Bus-stop the characters are also bored and frustrated with seemingly endless waiting at their bus-stop. They also engage in trivia and in conversations about their society and their helplessness to change anything. Through their conversations, we learn about social problems in China: nepotism is widespread and an accepted reality of everyday life. One must bribe or have good connections to find a good job, to obtain a hot merchandise item, or to send children to good schools, and so on. As the Old Man in the play says:

> You need to have back-door for everything. Just like taking a bus, you law-abiding people have to stand in the long queue, but not the person who knows the driver. He just sneaks to the front door and waves to the driver. The front door is opened for him, because he has the "connection"! The moment you rush to the front door, it closes right in front of you. This is called "serving the passengers"! What can you do? Everybody sees it, and yet, nobody can do anything about it.(86)

Approximately two decades of corruption and the ensuing pessimistic mood of the society in China have taken their toll among the young generation, who are disillusioned, frustrated and resigned. The play includes three such young people from this generation. The nineteen years old young fellow is rude, uneducated and has no plans or expectations for the future, but only the desire to enjoy whatever he has. He decides to go to the city to spend the five *yuan* he has just earned on a new food called yogurt. The Girl and Glasses are in their late twenties. They grew up during the Cultural Revolution, and were deprived of opportunities of normal education. They realize that they have missed the best times of their lives and find themselves now poorly adjusted to their environment. The young woman only wishes to find a husband in the city, hoping that this would bring some enrichment to her life. Glasses represents another type of personality belonging to this lost generation. Realizing that he has lost many years of his life, he tries hard to catch up. He mumbles English sentences while waiting for the bus. (A familiar scene in China in the early eighties.) He is taking the bus to the city to register for the entrance examinations. "This is my last chance. If the bus still does not come, I might miss the time to register. How painful it is to waste one's life waiting! (104)" To these characters, waiting means losing time and wasting life.

This light comical depiction of pessimism in The Bus-stop seems, on the surface, to resemble the pessimism that is so pervasive in Waiting for Godot noted earlier. However, the comparison ends here, for the pessimism in Beckett's play is deep rooted, it is a manifestation of the playwright's subjective personal world view. Whereas Gao Xingjian's characters are true to life and represent today's sad realities in China, and the author, while doing so, also brings forth through characters like Silent Man and Glasses glimpses of hope and positive thinking which are also real.

One of the most serious criticism of The Bus-stop was related to its alleged advocating of the bourgeois existentialist outlook, because of its theme of free choice. Edith Kern explains existentialism in Waiting for Godot in the following statement:

> But unlike Sartre, Beckett's characters are never 'en situation'. They are, rather, entirely removed from the more immediate problems of society and not living within a social world, they do not play a part either in good faith or in bad.... They are never 'engagé,' or committed, never the god-like creators of their essence as men.[13]

The characters in The Bus-stop make their choices according to their backgrounds and experiences in society, unlike the existentialist characters who have no background or past to rely on.[14] In fact, Gao Xingjian tries to present a Marxist idea of Man. "Man", says Marx, "should revolve about himself as his own true sun."[15] According to Marxist ideology, though man, i.e. mankind, is his own maker, he is first of all a social being. Society not only produces an individual's need to assert and realize himself, it also provides him with the meaning of doing so.[16]

An individual's relationship with society in positive terms could mean finding one's place in society, recognition, sharing and acceptance. Negatively it could mean non-acceptance, lack of choice or limitations imposed upon the individual's life by society one way or the other. The characters of The Bus-stop have close links with the society they live in. Their bitterness and happiness, care and concerns are all connected with the society: The Old Man wants to play chess with the champion so as to gain public recognition. The Carpenter wishes to pass on his inherited skill to the young workers so that his special trade will continue. Glasses craves to realize his aspirations of university education by passing the entrance examinations. The other three characters go to the city for personal reasons, but which are also connected with social issues. The Mother has to meet her husband and son in the city because she does not want them to move to her suburban town. She wants to keep her son in the city because the schools in the suburbs are usually inferior. It is necessary to have the education from a good school, if a child is to be accepted to a university in China. But the Mother can not be transferred to the city because she does not have the necessary connections. The Girl wants to find a well placed husband in the city because it would enable her to fulfill her dreams of walking down the city streets in colourful dresses. Lout's reason to try the new food called yogurt in the city is simple, but it also reveals the sharp contrast between city and suburban living.

During the long period of waiting, the passengers in The Bus-stop begin to change their attitudes towards each other and develop friendship and understanding among themselves. Glasses and the Girl grow fond of each other (123). Instead of disgust, the Old Man becomes concerned about Lout's future and urges Lout to learn a trade. After having experienced the agony of waiting and listened to conversations of fellow passengers, Lout realizes the importance of making progress in life and asks the Carpenter to accept him as an apprentice (123). He also becomes more caring towards the others. He offers to carry luggages for the Mother when the passengers decide to walk to the city (133).

In Waiting for Godot, the waiting is endless and the characters are incapable of changing the situation. In The Bus-stop, the passengers realize their predicament, discuss their situation and then collectively decide to walk to the city, which is related to their desire to end the endless waiting. Through the process of realization the passengers have transformed themselves from the situation of passive waiting to individual efforts and action. It is through the Silent Man's example and their own efforts that the seven passengers discover their own potential to change the situation.

A short discussion related to plot and structure of the two plays is included in the following to sum up the differences in the theme of waiting, noted earlier.

In traditional Western theatre, plot is the soul of a play; it creates action, unites ideas, characters and language. In the Theatre of the Absurd, ideas are no longer the main concern, neither is the plot. Robert W. Corrigan noted that: "All of the Absurdists want a theatre which progresses not through a predetermined subject and plot, but through an increasingly intense and revealing series of emotional states."[17] In an Absurdist drama, the traditional elements of plays have been wrenched, so we find that the plot has been twisted into a situation that is meant to reveal an emotional state, as we have seen in Waiting for Godot. The Bus-stop is also a play without a plot. The theme of the play is presented through an increasingly tense situation related to the waiting passengers' emotional states. However, unlike the Theatre of the Absurd which abandons presentation of ideas in drama,[18] The Bus-stop conveys a clear idea to its audience. The play delineates the characters' frustrations and despair in their waiting, but it is not a play of nothingness. The characters and situations are not static and interchangeable as in Waiting for Godot. The author criticizes unproductive waiting, confirms the value of each individual and encourages people to take control of their own lives. Thus The Bus-stop is not constructed on a complete system of paradoxes as in Waiting for Godot. The play has demonstrated the power of will to change the situation first through the Silent Man's determination and later through the remaining passengers' decisiveness, which is contradictory to the main point in Beckett's play.

The basic structure of The Bus-stop and Waiting for Godot appear to be the same. The characters are waiting for something which never appears. The action of the two plays -- waiting -- is not what the characters are after but what they want to avoid. However, there are significant differences. Instead of "waiting for Godot ... for nothing ... for waiting" as in Waiting for Godot, the characters in The Bus-stop form a different pattern of "waiting for bus...for nothing... no more waiting". The structure of Waiting for Godot can also be seen as a circle: the two friends are waiting at the beginning of the play and they plan to return the following day, when the play ends. The beginning is the end. In between, the two friends engage themselves in meaningless conversations and activities while their physical and mental health continues to deteriorate. Through this structure Beckett has impressed upon his audience that life is cyclical, spiraling downwards, so to speak. The structure of The Bus-stop, on the other hand, spirals upwards. The characters start their long wait at the beginning of the play; but they are ready to move on when the play ends. Beckett's characters present a pessimistic and nihilistic world view; but Gao's characters demonstrate a realistic and optimistic world view.

Lastly, it should be noted that Gao Xingjian's adaptation of Absurdist theatre has carried him beyond Beckett's Waiting for Godot to follow Brecht's ideas of a "positive hero"[19] in order to convey his message to the audience of The Bus-stop. Traditionally, a dramatist could successfully present a profound truth about life, philosophy, or human nature by creating a great character, an outstanding individual in the play in whom the audience could identify a universal truth. In the Theatre of the Absurd, the characters have no individuality and often no names. Sometimes they are interchangeable. The author of The Bus-stop creates a special hero in the play -- the Silent Man. He is not a conventional hero because he does not utter a word in the whole play. Yet, he is not an absurd character like Godot. His actions deliver a universal truth. Though the Silent Man walks to the city by himself at the beginning of the play, his image never leaves the stage. The author introduces a specific musical theme to represent the Silent Man; this theme functions as the leitmotif of the play. The music in the background permeates the entire performance, inspiring and encouraging the waiting passengers as well as the audience. The Silent Man is a positive hero as Brecht demanded in his theatre:

> It is the theatre's job to present the hero in such a way that he stimulates conscious rather than blind imitation. ... Before a correct attitude can be imitated it must first have been understood that the principle is applicable to situations that are not exactly like those portrayed.[20]

It should also be noted that Brecht has always considered himself to be a socialist realist. He considers socialist realism as a "true to fact representation of life and human relations by means of an art derived from socialist attitudes".[21] The positive hero figures in Brechtian theatre reflect Brecht's socialist realism ideas. But Brechtian heroes are not absolute proletarian heroes as in some Chinese model dramas.[22] The characters in Brecht's theatre as George Lukács defines them, are "living human beings, with a more complex dialectic of good and evil."[23]

The definition of Brecht's positive hero quoted earlier, befits the Silent Man. The Silent Man may not be a imitation of any figure in real life, but his attitude towards waiting is easy to understand and can be applied to any real life situation. Through the Silent Man's actions and the musical theme the playwright attempts to tell the audience to give up passive waiting, to be self-reliant and to make efforts to reach the intended goal. But the Silent Man is not a flawless proletarian hero as he may be seen in many Chinese propaganda dramas, in which the hero is a spokesman for the communist party, who always acts as a leader of the masses. Since the Silent Man acts on his own and does not try to lead others to the city, this image of him has been severely criticized by official critics because they believe that the Silent Man is an "individualist who is isolated from the masses".[24]

The ten years of waiting in The Bus-stop can be seen as a satire of the ten years of Cultural Revolution. For more than ten years, ninety percent of intellectuals were restricted from doing anything but manual labour.[25] When the Revolution was finally over, many people realized that they had wasted the best times of their lives waiting: waiting for the chaos to end. People were not satisfied with the Revolution, but they could do nothing to bring about a change. Only a small number of people had worked or studied secretly on their own during that period and, as a result, after the Revolution they were in a better position to cope with the demands of modern society. Gao Xingjian was himself one of such people. The Silent Man represents this kind of image. He works silently on his own and uses his actions to arouse others.

During the Cultural Revolution, however, waiting was imposed upon the masses and the people did not have the freedom to choose their actions as in the waiting in The Bus-stop. But by showing the Silent Man as an example, the author attempts to tell the audience that whether waiting is self-imposed or not, it can be avoided if one makes an effort.

3.2. Language and Communication

In Western theatrical tradition, language was the primary medium of drama by which the ideas of the playwright were communicated to the audience. Aristotle first stressed the prominent function of language as an element of drama.[26] Northrop Frye defined drama as "a mimesis of dialogue or conversation."[27] Roman Ingarden has identified four functions of the language of drama: representation, expression, communication, and the influence of one character upon another.[28] Separately, each function by itself can be seen to represent a single dimension of the action on which they all depend; collectively they form not only the action, but also the presentation of the action to the spectator.[29] In order to present a special incident on stage, the four functions of language must be bound together to delineate the significance and special quality of this incident. These four functions of language, however, are not as evident in modern theatre. Dramatic language has frequently lost one or more of its designated dimensions in modern times. The contents of the dramatic expression can be merely subjective feelings whose meaning remains obscure to the audience or characters may speak to one another without communicating anything. Language has become less central. The modern playwrights want to present their plays in a way that not only involves language but other elements as well. Nevertheless, language is still an important part of modern drama, though it is presented in an unconventional way. Theatrical language now includes other elements in addition to dialogue or conversation.

As experimental dramas of their periods, Waiting for Godot and The Bus-stop have both introduced new dimensions in theatrical language. The dialogues are many faceted and both authors have included elements of music in their plays. Both playwrights have special interest in music and consider it as part of theatrical language. They believe that theatrical language should not be like literary language in novels but, as Beckett explains, be rather like a musical structure, which presents a "form in movement".[30]

Form is of crucial importance to Beckett. What a character says, as far as Beckett is concerned, is governed entirely by how he says it. Beckett once commented on the passage from St. Augustin concerning the two thieves crucified with Christ, which he used in Godot: "I am interested in the shape of the idea. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustin: 'Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.' That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters." [31]

It is the linguistic formulation rather than any explicit symbolism that caught Beckett's attention. In many studies it is noted that the symmetry is an important feature in Waiting for Godot.[32] The play is composed of two equally balanced acts, echoing each other. The characters appear in pairs -- each individual being totally dependent on his partner; and the language of the play depends on a symmetrical movement.

Repetition is a major structuring device used in Waiting for Godot. The endings of the two acts of the play are repeated, which seems to convey an endless process. Repetition of certain actions, words and phrases are obvious: Vladimir and Estragon embrace when they meet, Pozzo and Lucky come and go, the discussions related to suicide, Estragon's nightmare and the most prominent, the constant reiteration of the sentence "waiting for Godot." Beckett himself has compared repetition to the form of music.

> The kind of form one finds in music, for instance, where themes keep recurring. When in a text, actions are repeated, they ought to be made unusual the first time, so that when they happen again -- in exactly the same way -- an audience will recognize them from before.[33]

Music is after all the most abstract, formal and the least referential of all arts[34], and yet, Beckett deals with words which are inevitably charged with referential contexts. The dialogues in Waiting for Godot are more effective as dissolutions of the relationship between speeches and the speakers than any referential meanings. Beckett insisted on the importance of form in his play rather than the meaning it might convey. In performances, sound effect is paramount, and other aspects are merely overtones. In Waiting for Godot, Beckett employs devices such as alliteration and dissonance in dialogues to create effects of both poetry and music (13, 14A, 25A, 40A,49). There is a tremendous sound effect in the following dialogue.

> Estragon: All the dead voices.
> Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.
> Estragon: Like leaves.
> Vladimir: Like sand.
> Estragon: Like leaves.
> Silence
> Vladimir: They all speak at once.
> Estragon: Each one to itself.
> Silence
> Vladimir: Rather they whisper.
> Estragon: They rustle.
> Vladimir: They murmur.
> Estragon: They rustle.
> Silence
> Vladimir: What do they say?
> Estragon: They talk about their lives.
> Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.
> Estragon: They have to talk about it.
> Vladimir: To be dead is not enough for them.
> Estragon: It is not sufficient.
> Silence
> Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.
> Estragon: Like leaves.
> Vladimir: Like ashes.
> Estragon: Like leaves.
> Long silence. (40A)

This anti-phonal dialogue brings little meaning to the theme of the play. But with its formation and sound organization, it is a modern poem of its own. This form of dialogue is typical in Beckett's theatre. In Waiting for Godot, more than eight times Estragon and Vladimir exchange this type of music hall cross talk. Sometimes sounds of words even destroy the logic of language. the best example is Lucky's speech. Lucky starts his declaration with "the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God" (28A), and his speech soon falls into a pattern no longer bearing upon God's existence, but becomes a repetition of similar words and syllables. Words are strung together, not by logic but by association of ideas and their sound quality. (Football, running, cycling, swimming, flying, floating, riding...etc.) Language is not used to depict a given situation but to create some sound effect as in music. Beckett has managed to produce a musical effect in his play without introducing music.

Gao Xingjian once said that theatrical language should be treated like music, in which the sound effect is the first priority.[35] In traditional Chinese theatre, music has always been an important component. Even when a character talks, the words in the dialogues are pronounced in a musical tone with high and low pitches. Gao Xingjian, however, does not want to follow the rigid traditions of performances in Chinese classical theatre, but wants to modify techniques of both Chinese traditional theatre and modern Western drama. He has emphasized the formal musical and poetic aspects of words, both in written forms and in performances and also applied music in his plays as part of the performance. These applications will be discussed in the following.

In his suggestions for the performance of The Bus-stop, Gao Xingjian says that the play is an experiment in multiple dialogues. At times, two, three, or even as many as seven characters speak simultaneously. Sometimes they speak at the same level of loudness, ignoring each other, but talking directly to the audience. Sometimes several dialogues start concurrently. Different groups of characters maintain their dialogues without disturbing each other. The volumes however, could be different. As the author explained:

> Just as one does not demand that every instrument in an orchestra be played at the same pitch, so the multiple voice-over dialogues need not be delivered at the same volume. The main [vocal] theme should be complimented by different harmonies and accompaniments, but not overwhelmed by them.[36]

The following example of polyphonic dialogues illustrates that through selective use of main vocal sounds, delivered in high speech volumes (strong), the focus is maintained on the central theme of "self-reliance" in the dialogues of The Bus-stop. Three conversations are carried on simultaneously: between the Old Man and Lout; the Girl and Glasses; the Carpenter and Lout. The Mother talked to herself at the beginning and the Girl joined her in the end.

> (The following dialogues are divided into three groups. Basically all characters talk simultaneously, but sometimes there is cross-talk. The dialogues and soliloquies have different sound volumes. Sometimes one dialogue is louder than the other or vice versa.) *[The slashes are added by the translator to indicate the change of speakers. The format, however, remains as per the original text.]*
>
> **Old Man (strong):** It's time for you to seriously learn some trade, otherwise no one will marry you. **Glasses (less strong):** I've already passed the age to enrol in the exam. Why should I still go? Youth has passed / **Mother (weak):** Once I walked alone at night. The rain kept pouring down. / **Lout (strong):** But I don't have a chance if nobody is willing to accept me as an apprentice. / **Old Man (strong):** (Winking at the Carpenter) You have a master in front of you. / before I realize.... / **Girl (less strong):** (Touching Glasses with her shoulder) Why can't you take evening courses or learn through correspondence? / **Lout (strong):** Master, do you still accept apprentices? / I'm sure you still have a chance. /**Mother (weak):** I felt that someone was following me. I quickly glanced at the back, but / **Carpenter (less strong):** It depends on the kind of person. / couldn't see very clearly because of the rain. I only saw the shape of a person with an umbrella. / **Lout (less strong):** What kind of person do you want? / **Glasses (strong):** Do you really believe so? / **Girl (strong):** Yes, I believe so. (letting him hold her hands) / **Mother (weak):** That person followed me neither too close nor too far: If I walked fast he speeded up; if I walked slow he slowed down as well. I was so scared that / **Carpenter (less strong):** Learning a trade is not the same as doing research work. As long / my heart seemed to jump out. / as the guy is deft and diligent, he will be all right. / **Lout (strong):** What do you think of me? / **Girl (less strong):** Oh, that's not right. (withdrawing her hands from Glasses and turning to hold the Mother's arms.) / **Carpenter (strong):** Only a little bit too slippery. / **Girl (less strong):** What happened later? / **Mother (less strong):** I finally got home... (The Glasses is listening to their conversation, squatting down with his arms holding his knees.) (123-124)

Like in music and opera, the volume of each dialogue in the above quotation oscillates from strong to less strong. The strong volumes always carry a positive meaning. First, the Old Man encourages Lout to learn a trade. Then the high pitch was given to the Girl and Glasses when she tries to convince him that he still has a chance in life. Lastly, the dialogue between Lout and the Carpenter is loud when the young man asks the Carpenter to accept him as an apprentice. The Mother's voice is always weak because she only talks about her past experiences which are irrelevant to the main theme and present situation.

The following discussion deals with Gao Xingjian's direct application of poetry in his play. Not all dialogues in a play contribute to the main theme. Some dialogues, like lyrical poetry, describe characters' feelings, dreams, and emotions. It is Gao Xingjian's intention to blend modern drama with contemporary poetry.[37] In traditional Chinese theatre, many well-known plays are noted for their high poetic qualities. Therefore, this idea of fusion of drama and poetry can be seen as inherited from the Chinese theatrical tradition. Gao Xingjian tries to attain poetic effects through images as well as through the forms of the printed texts. In performance, these images, when accompanied by appropriate sound effects, produce great poetic and musical impressions. The audience imagines vivid images beyond the stage and feels the changing emotions of characters.

At the beginning of this century, many Western poets who were inspired by the Chinese and Japanese poetry paid special attention to the structure of a poem and the images in a poem, but restricted the meaning contained therein. This new trend became known as the Imagist Movement. In The Bus-stop the author intends to create poems modelled on Imagist poetry in some of the dialogues. As printed, the following passage creates visual impressions because it is printed in a diagonal way resembling the shape of stairs, something which is of course better presented in the original Chinese text.

> (Sound of rain and wind; -- the following dialogues are mixed with the changing sounds of rain and wind.)
>
> **Lout:** Listen, the river is rising...
> **Girl:** Just sit like this...
> **Glasses:** This is ...good...
>
> **Lout:** ..This moment, surely it will be easy to catch fish...
> **Girl:** .... Let it rain, rain! ... The wind is cold...
> **Glasses:** The hazy fog, the field, the hill on the other side of
> the river, the road ...

Lout: .... Old Man, I
Girl: ... But it is warm in the heart.
Glasses:.... Of the future, are all hazy...

Lout: bet you!
Girl: Leaning on his shoulder, I sit with him...
Glasses: She is so gentle, ... so kind,... so nice.......

Old Man: Young fellow, you are not young
any more, if you still muddle along...
Girl: .... Your spectacles are...
Glasses: How beautiful...How could I have not realized until now...

Old Man: How can you settle down in life?
Girl: ....Full of steam.
Glasses:...... Oh, don't wipe them, let them be steamy... (122-123)

The dialogue is printed in the shape of stair cases, in short separated lines with three lines in a group. This form reminds us of some of William Carlos Williams' poems, in which the words accompany the perception of forms.[38]

Forms were especially important to the Imagist poets at the beginning of this century. Ezra Pound argued that Image, in common with the most intense expression of art, has the power to create form. Great works of art, Pound insisted, cause form to come into being, the same way analytical geometry does, only the subject matter is different. A poet describes the form of an emotion, not a geometric shape. In writing a poem, the author must use his image because he sees it or feels it.[39] The quoted dialogue from The Bus-stop is a gentle expression of characters' feelings corresponding with clear images of cold rain, hazy fog, field, hill, etc.

Besides using words to form a musical theatrical language, Gao Xingjian has also inserted music directly into his play to perform an independent function. He has stated:

> Sound, including music itself, should not be purely expository. In the play, sound effect and dramatic situations work as a combined whole, sound often being added as a counterpoint, and the contrast between combinations of harmony and disharmony is used to give the music an independent role, allowing it to carry on a dialogue with both the characters and the audience.[40]

In The Bus-stop the Silent Man, as the protagonist of self-reliance, appears on the stage only for the first few minutes. But a theme music representing him is played back constantly after he leaves, which acts as a leitmotif presented and is attenuated by musical variations as noted below. It is this music that unites the seven waiting passengers and brings back the main theme of the play over and over again.

In traditional Chinese theatre, music has always been an inseparable part of the performance but the music is rarely original; the tunes are usually taken out of an existing repertory and are shared by many different works. Nevertheless, in The Bus-stop the author has suggested that the music of the Silent Man be especially composed with different variations.[41] For this, he has chosen a Western idea. The reiteration of the motif is rather like the theme music in a movie or the leitmotif in a Western ballet or opera.

The nine variations of the music for the Silent Man are noted in the following [*Texts in brackets are my interpretations of the situations of the play when the music starts.*]:

1.[Just after the Silent Man leaves the group to walk to the city] A light music expresses a kind of wilful and painful pursuit. (99)

2.[The group starts to feel restless] The theme of music can be faintly heard, like the sound of wind. (104)

3.[Superintendent Ma asks people to go back with him] The music of the Silent Man appears again, not loud but distinct. (108)

4.[People start to think about walking to the city] The sound of an approaching bus and the music of the Silent Man can be heard, gradually becoming more distinct and the rhythm becoming more and more audible. (110)

5.[People complain about the bus company] The tune of the Silent Man starts and becomes a quick and taunting melody in triple time. (113)

6.[The waiting passengers become desperate] Gradually, the sound of traffic, intermingled with the music of the Silent Man becomes audible in the distance, rising and falling in pitch. The tempo of the music quickens and it turns into a lively melody. (119)

7.[Seven passengers are taking shelter from rain under a big plastic sheet] The music of the Silent Man is audible again in the distance and this time it becomes stirring. (125)

8.[The group is discussing whether they could walk to the city] The music of the Silent Man, like a sound from outer space, is loud and strong, floating above all the traffic noises. (130)

9.[The group is about to take off] The music of the Silent Man becomes a grand and humorous marching music. (133)

There are changes in mood of the music: from wilful and painful to taunting, to stirring, to loud and strong, to grand and humorous. The changes in mood express the changing attitudes of the remaining passengers. When the Silent Man starts his journey, he knows that it will not be easy, but he is determined. His action is a criticism of the useless waiting, therefore the taunting tone. The passengers realize their desperation in prolonged waiting: the lively tone. The group argues whether they could walk to the city: the music is stirring. Finally they decide to take off: the music becomes a humorous march. The humorous final tone also reveals the jovial quality of the play: after all those painful years in waiting one is still able to guide his or her destiny.

In summary, although both Beckett and Gao Xingjian have applied elements of music and poetry to their plays, there is a difference in their ultimate objectives. Beckett has emphasized the shape of the form and sound effects of the words in order to create a musical analogy. To Beckett, communication is not under consideration, because it is impossible to communicate in this meaningless world. Even though Gao Xingjian has learned dramatic techniques and many concepts of dramatic language from Beckett, his ultimate objective is to be expressive and communicative so as to bring positive changes in attitudes of his audience despite the prevailing sense of hopelessness in Chinese society. Repetition of meaningless dialogues in Waiting for Godot not only conveys the theme of nothingness effectively, it also allows Beckett to incorporate elements of poetry and music to enhance the effectiveness. In The Bus-stop, repetition is not used in the dialogues, but repeated emphasis has been placed on the volumes of sound in a polyphony to foreground the theme of self-reliance. In Beckett's play, repetition, music, poetry, etc., are all inseparable parts of the "meaningless" whole; whereas in The Bus-stop, the components such as the theme music for the Silent Man and the Imagist poetry in the written form have been added to other elements so as to increase the effectiveness of the "message".

In addition to the above, other elements of language and communication, such as communication breakdown, silence and the ending of the play are also significant. These are briefly discussed in the following.

Martin Esslin has described the dramatic language in Beckett's plays as follows:

> Language in Beckett's plays serves to express the breakdown, the disintegration of language. Where there is no certainty, there can be no definite meaning -- and the impossibility of ever attaining certainty is one of the main themes of Beckett's plays.[42]

Communication breakdown is one of the obvious features of Beckett's play which have been discussed by many critics. In Waiting for Godot, the stage directions often emphasize the dissolution of the coordination of speech and deeds. The stage directions are closely linked with the conducts of the characters. Although the characters constantly speak to one another, their dramatic language lacks those factors that Roman Ingarden described as expression, communication, and reciprocal influence[43]. The characters' conversation is usually accomplished through an abrupt exchange of trivialities and motivated by their desire to continue talking, so as to prove their existence as well as to pass time.

> Vladimir: Say something!
> Estragon: I'm trying.
> Long silence
> Vladimir: (in anguish) Say something at all!
> Estragon: What do we do now?
> Vladimir: Wait for Godot.
> Estragon: Ah!
> Silence (41)

The requests for conversation contrast with the interruptions that occur when one character is irritated or bored by the subjects brought up by the interlocutor, thereby deterring the free flow of conversation. Thus, Estragon tells Vladimir that enough has been said about the shoes(45), and Vladimir cuts off Estragon's bawdy story with an emphatic "Stop it!"(11). Vladimir also interrupts Estragon's efforts to recount his dreams, first with an exclamation telling him not to tell, and later with an angry command that he should say nothing (46, 58). In these dialogues, language is neither linked to an expression nor to communication. The quick shift of subjects shows the characters' lack of interest in the actual topic as well as in the purpose of conversation. The dialogue becomes abstract, because no motivation or inclination is indicated in the conversation. Despite exchange of words, the dialogue only expresses an accelerating change of subjects. The short speeches correspond to the rapidly changing subjects and both reveal a dissolution of relationship between the speech and the speaker.

In The Bus-stop there is a constant shift of subjects in characters' conversations, but there is no communication breakdown. The characters in The Bus-stop are strangers to one another. They meet at the bus-stop and talk about various subjects in order to pass time. Characters in both Beckett's and Gao's plays use conversation as a way to pass time. In Waiting for Godot, waiting and talking are the only things in the world that they can do. They have no future and have no expectations for the future. This is not the case for the characters in The Bus-stop. Each character has a definite idea of coming to the bus-stop for the clear purpose of going to the city. They talk because the buses do not arrive and therefore they can not go on with their business. They do not talk simply for the sake of talking like Beckett's characters. The wide-ranging conversations in The Bus-stop reveal the characters' emotions and anxieties and express their complaints and concerns about their work, personal lives, and society. The language is never detached from the speakers and it always represents the act of reciprocal influence and genuine communication. Even in some polyphonic dialogues which involve three, four, or as many as seven characters speaking at once, reciprocal influence between characters still exists. Although seven characters talk simultaneously, usually two characters would react to each other's talk; therefore, total confusion is not created by the multiple conversation.

Silence, like repetition, is a powerful communication tool in Beckett's Waiting for Godot. The playwright has used it for the greatest impact to suggest his own personal philosophical beliefs and to repeatedly illustrate the natural endings of meaningless conversations. At the metaphysical level, silence can be associated with withdrawal from the outer world into the self, introspection, thought, meditation and perhaps being on a higher level of consciousness. In-depth investigations into Beckett's philosophical beliefs and silence have been carried out by many critics and a re-examination is beyond the scope of the present analysis. This brief review of the most salient features of the play will focus only upon other more visible effects of silence in Waiting for Godot. It suffices for this purpose to quote Sidney Homan:

> A common observation among those who describe Beckett and his plays is that in speaking about the desire for silence, the playwright avoids silence: as long as we talk about falling into the abyss, abandoning a dis-credited external world, we delay the final step, however wished-for it may be. ... That inner, silent state, ...is Beckett's own frontier.[44]

The empty dialogues are in sharp contrast to the periods of silence which recur throughout Waiting for Godot. Silence often occurs when the dialogue breaks, the characters being exhausted by the subject. It is invoked by Vladimir for example, when the dialogue becomes unbearable (12). The tension between sound and silence becomes more intense as the play moves towards the end. Beckett's characters seem to present two paradoxical aspects of men's metaphysical inclination -- their compulsion to speak, which is social, and their condemnation to be silent, which is a manifestation of their solitudes. This paradox is shown by juxtaposing Lucky's muteness in Act II to the incessant talking of Vladimir and Estragon. The dialogue in Waiting for Godot indicates that since language is not an efficient vehicle of communication, silence is just as important. In a situation where truth cannot be expressed, it might be more truthful to remain silent. But silence is an unrealized dream for Beckett's characters. They yearn for it, yet, they never reach it. To be silent is to cease to perform the activities that are most social and most human and in a sense, to die, which is the last thing Beckett's characters want to do. Theodor Adorno has said of Endgame that it is a play "tending towards silence."[45] His comment of its language can be applied equally well to Waiting for Godot: "The words have a makeshift because the silence was not wholly attained; they are the accompaniment to a stillness they disturb."[46]

Unlike Beckett, communication is the main objective of Gao Xingjian. As noted earlier, the language in The Bus-stop on the whole has served the four functions of representation, expression, communication and reciprocal influence. Silence, therefore, can be antithetical to his objectives. Stage directions in The Bus-stop do not serve to show the dissolution of coordination of speech and deeds as in Waiting for Godot. Silence in The Bus-stop is used as a device to create a special image of the Silent Man. The acts of the Silent Man express a simple truth that action speaks louder than words. But even here, silence is accompanied by the gestures of characters as part of communication. The following passage provides an example.

> **Old Man:** The bus has just gone?
> (The Silent Man nods.)
> **Old Man:** Are you going to town?
> (The Silent Man nods.)
> **Old Man:** You have to be early if you want to go to the city on a Saturday afternoon. If you wait till everyone is off from work, you will never get on the bus.
> (The Silent Man smiles.) (85)

The Silent Man does not give any verbal answer to or comment on the Old Man's questions/statements, but his gestures serve the purpose well. Although he does not say a word during the conversation, he communicates with the Old Man through body language. When the Silent Man disappears from the scene, his presence and his message to move on are presented in the form of reminders for the remaining passengers and audience through the sounds of his theme music being continuously played in the background. The effect of silence in Waiting for Godot is for the audience to realize that silence is the result of communication breakdown, which is direct and also for the audience to feel the depths of the philosophical message of emptiness, which is indirect and profound. Since conversation is a primary vehicle of expression in The Bus- stop, silence is simply a part of the conversation and the effect upon the audience is only direct. The audience does not experience the profound indirect effects of the play as in Waiting for Godot.

Some studies have noted that the ending of The Bus-stop resembles the ending of Waiting for Godot,[47] but a close comparison shows the contrary. With the exception of the speakers, the final lines of both acts of Waiting for Godot are identical. Vladimir and Estragon utter their intentions: "Yes, let's go"; but the stage direction reads: "they do not move" (35, 60a). It is left up to the stage direction to point out the inability of the characters to carry out their decision. In The Bus-stop, just as the group is ready to take off, Superintendent Ma calls everyone to wait for a moment: he has to tie his shoe-lace and the play ends. This can not be seen as an example of discoordination between expression and action because no stage direction is given to indicate that they do not go. However, this ending can be seen to contain an element of social satire. Superintendent Ma, being the head of a local supply store, controls certain hot merchandise items. This privilege enables him to build a network of contacts and to live a comfortable life. He is comfortable with the status quo and is the last person willing to accept change. Therefore, symbolically he is the last person in the play to be ready to move on. An element of social satire is also presented in the contradictory action of silence and talking. The silence of the positive characters may be a comment about the party's functionaries perpetual talking and their lack of positive action.

Gao Xingjian has not only selectively adapted communication techniques from Beckett to suit his objectives in The Bus-stop, but he has also introduced some techniques in the play borrowed from sources outside Beckett's plays. Narration is one such communication device he has borrowed from Brecht's epic theatre and traditional Chinese theatre and effectively applied in The Bus-stop. This will be examined next as the last topic in the analysis of language and communication.

As discussed in Chapters II and III, narration is an integral part of stage performance in Chinese traditional theatre. Narration is a time and effort saving device for depicting details of events and scenery in the performance and gives the actors more freedom. When an actor narrates, he comes out of the role he is playing and talks to the audience as if he were a bystander. The direct communication between the audience and the actor helps both to remember that they are in a theatre. The changing roles of actors, from a character in the play to a narrator seem to produce what Brecht defined as 'the alienation effect,' which is to distance the audience from what they are watching as well as to detach the actor from the role he is playing. Brecht explains the function of narration in the following passage:

> The stage began to tell a story. The narrator was no longer missing, along with the fourth wall. ... The actors, too, refrained from going over wholly into their roles, remaining detached from the characters they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of him.[48]

This movement, in and out from the roles of the characters, Brecht believes, will also help the audience to think objectively and independently about the play and the questions it poses because this device reminds the people in audience that they are watching a play. Often a narrator sits at one side of the stage telling the necessary facts of the situation, or as Brecht explains, "the stage narrates the sequence."[49]

In The Bus-stop, we do not find a separate narrator fulfilling the role in the manner described above. The seven characters not only narrate during the performance, they also walk out of their roles and comment on the situation in the play. Gao Xingjian, however, does not intend to reach the same alienation effect as Brecht prescribes for his epic theatre. In epic theatre, the main objective is to allow the audience to think independently and to refrain from identifying themselves with some of the characters in the play and their view-point. Brecht, therefore, often created foreign backgrounds or distant historical conditions so as to arouse the critical and intellectual faculties of the audience, because such remote settings would alienate the audience from the characters. Gao Xingjian does not intend to alienate the audience from the situation of the play, but rather encourages the audience to imagine themselves as one of the characters. The characters in The Bus-stop are average, familiar personalities of the society and the dialogues incorporate subjects of everyday conversation.

Brecht requests his actors always to act as a third person telling a story during the performance and Brecht's plays usually have little dialogue centred on personal encounter.[50] This is not the case in Gao Xingjian's experiments. Instead, in his suggestions for the performance of The Bus-stop, Gao insists that "care must be taken to create characters similar to those in contemporary society, and exaggeration is to be avoided."[51] Narration, as used in The Bus- stop in the form of direct communication between the actors and the audience, encourages the audience to think of themselves as one of the characters. The actors' comments on the situation of the play help to make the event on stage more cognizant with the audience's own experiences. The actors tell the audience about familiar situations of waiting: standing in lines to buy fish, waiting in hospital to see a doctor, etc. The audience realizes that though they are watching a play in a theatre, the questions raised in the play can also apply to their own experiences in daily life. To enjoy the actors' performances, Brecht, however, required the audience to maintain the stance of an observer in a relaxed manner and to think about the problems presented in the play, without being influenced by the stage performance. Both Brecht and Gao Xingjian, nevertheless, want their plays to contain a didactic purpose. Brecht wished his audience to draw certain conclusions from the phenomenon which were not actually presented in the play, but were hidden behind the scenes and by distancing the audience from the perpormances. Gao Xingjian, however, creates a didactic effect by drawing his audience into the situation of the play. Gao Xingjian does not tell his audience directly what they should do, but by delineating a sharp contrast between waiting and walking in The Bus-stop, he has provided his audience with enough material to draw conclusions on their own.

3.3. Time and Space

Time and space constitute two major elements of dramatic art. Actors must perform for the audience on a limited space of the stage and within a specific duration for the performance. In Western theatrical convention, time and space requirements were often rigidly followed and it was a broadly accepted principle that there should be unities of time, space and action. In periods of classical and neoclassical restrictions, a play was circumscribed to one whole day or some such short predetermined period and to a single geographic setting or action. The realist and naturalist dramas still incorporate these principles, but the *avant garde* dramatists of this century have broken away from this tradition. In a modern play, action and especially its unity is not essential, and time and space are no longer limited.

Since the main theme of Waiting for Godot and The Bus-stop is waiting, time and space, therefore, is central to both. The two playwrights have applied similar devices to deal with time and space, and yet, the two plays present different leitmotifs.

The indeterminacy of time and space is the leitmotif in Beckett's play. The play starts with the vagueness of time and locus such as an evening, a country road and a tree. The characters are not only incapable of coping with the problems of past, present and future, but also have difficulties in measuring time and locating themselves geographically. Such absurdities are exaggerated by the bizarre happenings, such as radical changes in the physical conditions of Pozzo and Lucky and the new leaves on the bare tree, which seem to appear overnight. The indefiniteness of time and space seems to indicate that man's predicament does not depend on a particular time or space but upon his attitude towards the known or unknown world.

> Estragon: And so on. Vladimir: The point is --
> Estragon: Until he comes.
> Vladimir: You're merciless.
> Estragon: We came here yesterday. (10, 10A)

In fact, it does not really matter whether Godot will come or not, because waiting will be the only future activity for the two characters. They waited there yesterday, and they will come again tomorrow. For Vladimir and Estragon time has stopped because for them past, present and future do not make any difference.

The absurdity of man's temporal orientation within a monotonous existence is not only reflected in the characters' attitudes towards time but also in their futile attempts at measuring it. Questions concerning time are scattered throughout the play. The irrelevance of time measurement is best depicted in Pozzo's changing attitudes which correspond with the physical changes taking place within him. In Act I, he lives by his watch and always tries to give accurate time whenever necessary (23,24,25). He tries to maintain his sanity by keeping his sense of clock-time which is limited to a day or twenty-four hours. His watch is his most important possession because it gives him the sense of hierarchy of values (he is the only one among the characters who owns a watch) and dynamics of life. Pozzo recognizes that when time stops, life ends. In Act II, Pozzo loses his watch along with his sight and his notion of time. His concept of time is destroyed, and the past and the future merge with the present. He explodes into shouting, summarizing the situation of a finite man in an infinite universe:

> Pozzo: (suddenly furious) Have you done tormenting me with your accursed time! When! One day, is that not enough for you? One day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (Calmer) They give birth aside of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then, it's night once more. (57A)

Later, Vladimir echoes Pozzo's key words "aside of a grave" and a "difficult birth" -- with a nuance that "time becomes a habit" (58). Much of the play dramatizes routines and repetitions that stretch and flatten time to an eventless continuum. In Günther Auder's observation, it is a "life without time."[52]

The location of the play is also uncertain. The stage direction tells us that the play takes place on "a country road," and the characters' dialogues suggest that this road is on the land belonging to Pozzo (16). But nobody knows the location of this road. Similar ambiguity is also shown in the characters' places of residence. In dialogues, the characters refer to the past events which supposedly took place in France. (The Eiffel Tower; the Durance, the Rhone, etc.) Yet, with fictitious names of places such as Cacknon country, it proposes that the events could have taken place anywhere or nowhere. It indicates a no man's land, an infinite universe, in which a man is a finite being and incapable of coping with worldly situations. The contrast of dramatic changes taking place in Pozzo and Lucky with the changelessness in Vladimir and Estragon also suggests that the knowledge of time and space does not bring a man happiness, but deterioration.

Gao Xingjian's main objective is also to free theatrical performances from restrictions of time and space. He has repeatedly pointed out that a theatre should have freedom, similar to a novel, in terms of time and space. Actors' performances should be like the literary language, which can freely express the past, the present and the future in an instant.[53] Traditional Chinese theatre offers this freedom. On a bare stage, a Chinese actor can easily transform the present into the past; the past into the future. But the traditional Chinese theatre follows firmly established rules of performances, which are not compatible with Gao Xingjian's new experiments. In The Bus-stop Gao Xingjian has experimented with new ideas on free movement of time and space, specifically with aspects associated with time.

The structures of time and locus in The Bus-stop appear to resemble Waiting for Godot. Time: a Saturday afternoon (in China Saturday is still a working day), location: a suburban bus-stop; in comparison to Waiting for Godot's Saturday evening (10A) and a country road. The stage direction in The Bus-stop tells us that there is a sign for a bus-stop in the middle of the stage and the writing on this sign is hardly legible. A cross-shaped railing stands nearby. The author indicates that it might symbolize a cross-road in one's path in life. The would-be passengers talk, joke, quarrel in order to shorten their time spent in waiting. They do not see waiting as their destination. They are conscious about the time passing by and worry about the bus not stopping. They have put their hopes on the bus they are waiting for, but that is not the only hope for them.

There is a difference in attitude towards passing time between Waiting for Godot and The Bus-stop. In both plays, the characters play games, argue, sleep in order to pass time. Beckett's characters are more than happy to pass the time in order to complete a day's waiting. The characters in The Bus-stop, on the contrary, are scared to realize that time has flown by and wish that it were not true. As in Beckett's play, the watch is an important prop in measuring time. When the Carpenter first asks Glasses the time, the later surprisingly finds that more than one year has passed. (Glasses' watch somehow indicates year, which is unusual.) Soon most people find that their watches have stopped. Superintendent Ma reads his watch as "The Thirteenth Month and Forty-eight day"--a date which can never be found on any calendar (100). As the time moves on, the waiting passengers feel the frustration and hopelessness of waiting.

> **Old Man:** For this chess game, I have been waiting all my life.
> **The Girl:** Nobody will wait for me any more.
> **Glasses:** This is my last chance. If the bus still doesn't come, I'll be too old to enrol for the entrance exam! Waiting! Waiting! How painful to waste one's life like this! (102,103)

Busses pass by without stopping; so is time. Ten years pass by in an instant. The battery of Glasses' watch runs out. The last working watch has stopped clicking. But that does not mean that time has stopped as well. Unlike Pozzo in Waiting for Godot whose sense of time is linked with his watch, the characters in The Bus-stop know that a watch is only a mechanism that measures time. Even though the watch has stopped, time is still moving.

> **Glasses:** How can you be so silly? Just because you've switched off my watch that does not mean that time has stopped. The existence of time is an objective reality. (114)

They feel that they have been cast aside in life and forgotten. "The world is fleeting by in front of you and you don't even see it" (116). The topic of conversation always returns to the present situation: what should they do now? Glasses first suggests that they should walk to the city like the Silent Man:

> **Glasses:** There is not going to be any bus stopping here. (With finality) Let's go, like that man. While we have been wasting our time at this bus-stop, he has had time enough to reach the city and may have accomplished something already. There is nothing worth waiting for here. (119)

This suggestion from Glasses is first echoed by the Old Man ("You're absolutely right. ... We've all stayed here waiting, bending more and more with age," 119) and then all the others also agree with Glasses. Yet, they all have various misgivings. The Old Man worries about his age: he may be too old to walk to the city; Glasses, about the fact that he may have already missed the date of his entrance-examinations; the Mother, that she may not be able to carry her heavy bag; etc. "Let's move, we've said everything that can be said... Come on!" Glasses urges everyone (129).

The author of The Bus-stop has introduced an absurd device in dealing with time: Ten years have passed by in an instant and the characters have grown old waiting. And yet, in this period of ten years, the characters do not eat or drink; none of them has nails and hair cut. Ionesco once defined his understanding of the word 'absurd' in the following: "Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose. ... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless."[54] If we apply Ionesco's definition to analyze The Bus-stop we will find that the play is not devoid of purpose, the characters are not lost in The Bus-stop. The actions in The Bus-stop are not senseless. The movement of time is exaggerated, but it is acceptable to the Chinese audience as a satire about the Cultural Revolution. To employ waiting as the main theme of the play to satirize the Cultural Revolution is ironic. The Cultural Revolution was a time of great turmoil, but it was dynamic on the surface. The Red Guards were busy destroying the old and "establishing" the new. Everybody was forced to stop his regular work and to join the revolution. By doing so, the whole country, in fact, was bogged down and stagnated for ten years. Waiting, therefore, is associated with the Revolution for the most people in China.

Exaggeration as a theatrical device is not new to Chinese audience. As noted in Chapter II, it can be traced back to the Chinese theatrical tradition.[55] Many traditional Chinese plays present stories of warped time. Good examples can be found in Tang Xianzhu's best known plays such as *Nanke ji* and *Handan ji,* in which more than twenty years of a person's life is presented as a dream in the play. The rapid movement of time though is impossible by the standards of common sense, it is acceptable in order to depict the unpredicable changes in one's life. Exaggeration of fleeting time in The Bus-stop can be explained in the same way. Although it is absurd to depict a span of ten years in an instant, it is nevertheless possible to use this device, so that the audience may realize that time can pass by quickly indeed if one spends his time in doing nothing.

In summary, we might say that either there is an abundance of time in Waiting for Godot or there is no time in it. J. P. Little summarized this in the following comment:

> What Beckett gives us is a sense of mythical time that is outside normal temporal categories, but not in the way in which classical theatre escaped these categories. In classical theatre the conventions are based on concentration. ... Beckett, freed from historical, clock-time, gives us an essential timelessness, but a timelessness bearing a weight of temporality that few writers have equalled.[56]

Time in Beckett's play is indefinite and so is the space. Even though in The Bus-stop the state of passive waiting has been presented for the most part of the play, time is moving rapidly. The time presented in The Bus-stop is also outside the normal temporal category, however, it is still within clock-time; and the characters in Gao Xingjian's play always have a clear idea of location and destination. Both time and space in The Bus-stop are defined. From this point, we might say that the exaggerated time in The Bus-stop is still realistic, but the timelessness in Waiting for Godot is metaphysical.

Beckett's Waiting for Godot has been called an antiplay,[57] on the grounds that it has no consequential dialogue, no character development, and no plot. The lack of plot or of action excludes Godot from conventional genres of either tragedy or comedy, because insofar as there are no events, there can be no interaction between characters, and thus no possibility of an outcome. Waiting for Godot is surely not a didactic play. Beckett merely shows that a universal mess in the human condition as he sees it, but without providing any remedy in this anti-conventional play. Despite some antiplay techniques used in The Bus-stop, the play is linked with everyday reality. Even though the play does not have a well developed plot, it contains an action which permits the development of characters[58] and dialogues in The Bus-stop are not inconsequential or disconnected. Through character development and dialogues, the play conveys a clear didactic message to its audience. The author of The Bus-stop presents the reality of contemporary Chinese society as it is and the absurd devices are used only for better impact and, therefore, to attain a better didactic result.

Notes

1 About the reception of Waiting for Godot, see Walter James Miller and Bonnie E. Nelson, Samuel Beckett's **Waiting for Godot** and Other Works (New York: Monarch Press, 1971) 77-79.

2 Shouzhu Chen, "Tan huangdan xiju de shuailou jiqi za woguo de yingxian" (A Discussion about the Decline of the Theatre of the Absurd and Its Influence in China) Shehui kexue pinglun (Social Sciences Commentary) 11 (1985) : 102-103.

3 The tanslations of the characters' names are borrowed from Geremie Barmé's translation of The Bus-stop. See Renditions (1983): 379.

4 Gao Xingjian, Gao Xingjian xijuli (A Collection of Gao Xingjian's Dramas) (Beijing: Masses Press, 1985) 103. Similar absurd sentences used in language teaching are seen in Ionesco's The Bald Prima Donna, such as "The dogs have got fleas, Cock fowl duck..." See Plays: Eugene Ionesco, Vol.I, trans. Donald Watson (London: John Calder, 1963) 116-117.

5 Realistic theatre requires the actor to imagine a false "fourth-wall" while acting. Denis Diderot is credited as the first to propose the fourth-wall stage practice in his "De la poésie dramatique." See Clara YÜ Cuadrado, "Cross-cultural Currents in the Theatre," 221.

6 The quotation from Beckett's play is taken from Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1954) 27a. All future page references to the play are also to this edition.

7 Pierre Aimé Touchard, "Un théâtre nouveau," Avant Scène No. 156 (1957): 2.

8 See Tory Wilson Organ, Philosophy and Self: East and West (Cranbury: Associated Univ. Presses, 1987) 170-171.

9 Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, 3rd ed. (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1985) 61.

10 Geremie Barmé's translation of The Bus-stop, Renditions (1983): 380.

11 Eva Metman, "Reflections on Samuel Beckett's Play," Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice- Hall, Inc., 1965) 122.

12 Jerome Ashmore, "Philosophical Aspects of Godot," Symposium Winter (1962): 303.

13 Edith Kern, "Drama Stripped for Inaction: Beckett's **Godot**," Yale French Studies No. 14 (1965): 47.

14 According to Jean-Paul Sartre, man is born into a kind of void. He has the liberty to remain in this void and live a passive existence. See J. A. Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms, Revised edition (London: Penguin Books, 1976) 251-252.

15 John Plamenatz, Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) 322.

16 Ibid. 321-323.

17 Rober W. Corrigan, "The Theatre in Search of a Fix," The Theatre in the Twentieth Century, ed. R. W. Corrigan (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1963) 15.

18 Ibid. 14.

19 John Willet ed. and trans. Brecht on Theatre (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964) 247.

20 Ibid. 247.

21 Quoted from I. Fradkin, "On the Artistic Originality of Bertolt Brecht's Drama," Brecht: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed., Peter Demetz (Englewood Cliff: Prentice- Hall, Inc., 1965) 97.

22 In February 1966, Jiang Qing convened a Forum on Literature and Art in the Armed Forces. There she explained the concept of 'model' operas. To display the model heroes fully, a system of priorities called the "three prominences" (san tuchu) was developed. These were: Among all characters give prominence to positive characters. Among positive characters give prominence to heroic characters. Among heroic characters give prominence to the main heroic characters. See Colin Mackerras, Chinese Theatre 167-178.

23 Georg Lukács, Realism in Our Time (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971) 88-89.

24 Tang Ying, "Chezhan san ren tan" (Three Persons' Discussion on The Bus- stop), Xiju bao (Drama Weekly) No. 3 (1984) 56.

25 Since 1949, individual life in China has always been controlled by the state. At the time before and after the Cultural Revolution, although everyone has to do what he is asked to do, each individual still has his regular work: students study at school; intellectuals do research, etc. All these routines were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.

26 In The Poetics, Aristotole considered diction as the fourth of the literary parts of tragedy. See Allan H. Gilbert ed., Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden (Detroit: Wayne U P, 1982) 76-79.

27 Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1973) 269.

28 Roman Ingarden, The Literary Work of Arts, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern U P, 1973) 380-382.

29 Ibid.

30 Beckett once commented on one of the productions with which he was associated, "Producers don't seem to have any sense of form in movement. The kind of form one finds in music." Encore March/April 1962: 44.

31 Quoted from Alan Schneider, "Waiting for Beckett," Twentieth Century Interpretation of Endgame ed. Bell Gale Chevigny (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice- Hall, Inc., 1969) 14.

32 See J. P. Little, En attendant Godot and Fin de partie (London: Grant & Cutler Ltd., 1981) 39-40.

33 Quoted from Charles Marowitz, "Paris Log," Encore March/April 1962: 44.

34 The musical qualities of Beckett's play have been studied by J. P. Little in **En attendant Godot and Fin de partie**.

35 See Gao Xingjian, "Yao shemeyiang de xiju" ("What Kind of Theatre do We Need"), Literature and Art Studies April, 1986: 90.

36 Gao Xingjian, "Suggestions for the Performance of The Bus-stop," trans. Geremie Barmé, Renditions (1983): 386.

37 Ibid.

38 See Charles Tomlinson ed., Willaim Carlos Willaims Selected Poems (New York: Penguin Books, 1976) 11-19.

39 Edmund S. de Chasca, "Pound's 'doctrine of the Image'," John Gould Fletcher and Imagism (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1978) 154-160.

40 Gao Xingjian, "Suggestions for the Performance of The Bus-stop 387.

41 Ibid.

42 Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd 86.

43 See Roman Ingarden, The Literary Work of Arts 380-382.

44 Sidney Homan, Beckett's Theatre (London: Bucknell U P, 1984) 197.

45 Theodor W. Adorno, "Towards an Understanding of **Endgame**," Twentieth Century Interpretation of **Endgame** 82-114.

46 Ibid. 101.

47 See Geremie Barmé, "A Touch of the Absurd," and He Wen, "Postscript: On Seeing the Play The Bus-stop," Renditions (1983): 375, 391.

48 Willet, Brecht on Theatre 71.

49 Andrew K. Kennedy, Dramatic Dialogue: the Duologue of Personal Encounter (London: Cambridge UP, 1983) 237.

50 Ibid. 238-249.

51 Gao Xingjian, "Suggestions for the Performance of The Bus-stop," Renditions (1983) 386.

52 Günther Anders, "Being Without Time: On Beckett's Play **Waiting for Godot**," Samuel Becktt, ed. Martin Esslin, 146.

53 Gao Xingjian, "What Kind of Theatre Do We Need," 91.

54 Quot. Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd 23.

55 Zeng Yongyi states in Zhongguo gudian xiju lunji (Essays on Chinese Traditional Theatre) that symbolization, exaggeration and alienation are the main characteristics of traditional Chinese theatre. See Zeng Yongyi, Zhongguo gudian xiju lunji (Taibei: Lianjin chuban shiye gongsi, 1986) 13-16.

56 J. P. Little, 63.

57 Ramona Cormier and Janis L. Pallister, Waiting for Death 98-109.

58 According to A Dictionary of Literary Terms, action is fundamental to a conventional drama. An essential part of action is the unfolding of character and plot. In The Bus-stop there is no clear development of plot, but there is a development of characters. See J. A. Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms 15.

CONCLUSION

Gao Xingjian belongs to a new generation of writers to emerge after the Cultural Revolution. He has aquried knowledge of literature as a student of French and through avid reading on his own, while experiences during the time he spent in the countryside have provide him with insights to the realities of life in rural China. Like many of his contemporaries, Gao Xingjian is eager to bring about literary renewal to the static Chinese literature and theatre. For more than thirty years, only two types of theatre have been maintained in China: the traditional operatic theatre, which mostly stage plays from traditional repertoires[1]; and the realistic spoken drama, used mostly for communist party's propaganda. Gao Xingjian's theatrical innovations are aimed at renewing the Chinese spoken drama by incorporating performing techniques from traditional Chinese theatre and by adapting modern Western theatrical devices. Gao is the first among the middle-aged generation of Chinese playwrights capable of such innovation. He is one of the few Chinese writers today who are familiar with both Western and Chinese literary traditions and have a good command of the French language.

Gao Xingjian has successfully employed the techniques of both modern Western theatre and traditional Chinese theatre to depict the contemporary Chinese social life. In Gao's own words, he has used the Chinese language to express modern Chinese people's "pursuit, confusion and the agony that comes from unsuccessful pursuit."[2] His concept of theatre, nevertheless, is deeply indebted to his great predecessors in Western modern theatre, particularly Artraud, Beckett, Brecht and Genet. J. T. Shaw has defined literary indebtedness in the following:

> An author may be considered to have been influenced by a foreign author, when something from without can be demonstrated to have produced upon him and/or his artistic works an effect his native literary tradition and personal development do not explain.[3]

In Gao's major works one can easily witness associations with the works of the four modern Western dramatists. Since Chinese spoken drama is modelled on Western theatre, it is only natural that Gao Xingjian would look for new ideas of expression and techniques of composition from modern Western theatre and adapt them to suit the taste of the Chinese audience.

Even though the Chinese audience has had no contact with Western *avant-garde* theatre until the late seventies, the modern Western theatrical techniques are not totally alien to Chinese audience. Traditional Chinese theatre almost always contains the characteristics of symbolization, exaggeration and alienation. These special qualities of traditional Chinese theatre have been appreciated by many Western modern dramatists at the beginning of this century. Some of these elements have been adopted and have become a part of Western modern theatre. Western audiences have witnessed the symbolic stage settings in Brecht's epic theatre; exaggerated make-ups in Genet's plays and alienation effects in both Brechtian theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd. Gao Xingjian has attempted to follow the same principles of selective adaptation. His aim is to incorporate Western ideas selectively to make them a part of modern Chinese theatre.

Gao Xingjian has written nine plays to date. The first two plays are Alarm Signal and The Bus-stop. In these plays, Gao has experimented with several new theatrical techniques such as polyphonic dialogues, multi-level stage effects created by light and sound systems, the use of the theatre-in-the-round and some absurd situations, which surprised the Chinese audience when they were first presented. But on the whole, these two plays still follow the didactic tradition and are basically realistic. Gao's later plays become even more abstract and absurd. However, the themes and characters of his plays are always deeply embedded in Chinese culture and society. It is for the originality of his creations and for the local colour of their dialogues and characters that Chinese people from both sides of the Taiwan Straits enjoy Gao Xingjian's plays.[4] The Bus-stop is a good example. The playwright creates an absurd situation in the play; but this absurd situation takes place in a realistic environment which makes absurdity acceptable.

In his book The Theatre of Revolt, Robert Brustein has considered that all modern Western playwrights share one common denominator: revolt.[5] Brustein has further classified modern theatre into three categories: messianic, in which the playwright rebels against God and tries to replace him; social, in which the dramatist rebels against the conventions, morals and values of the society he lives in; and existential, in which the author doubts the very value and meaning of human existence.[6] Gao Xingjian's plays categorize him as a playwright of social revolt. Although, like the existentialist dramatists, Gao dedicates his works not "to luxury and enjoyment but rather discomfort and unease,"[7] unlike the existentialist dramatists, he does not "exclude the principle of pleasure"[8] from his works. Gao Xingjian's plays usually describe men in society, in conflict either with the environment, community or family. He not only depicts their confusions and sufferings, but also their happiness, hopes and desires. In short, his plays represent "modern life for the purpose of whipping and scourging it."[9] He wants his plays to arouse the audience's imaginations and encourage the audience to participate in the performances. Most of Gao's plays have open endings for example, in The Bus-stop, the curtain drops when Superintendent Ma bends down to tie his shoe-lace; in The Wildman, the play ends with a little boy's dream, in which the boy is dancing with the wildman. Such open endings provide enough latitude for the audience to imagine what would logically follow after the curtain drops. This forces the audience to question the prevailing social values and morals or to decide for themselves whether the social issues questioned in the plays are valid.

Despite his indebtedness to the masters of modern Western theatre, Gao's works cannot be considered as imitations. Even though he has publicly acknowledged their influences, his works are creative and original. "In contrast to imitation, influence shows the influenced author producing work which is essentially his own."[10] Gao Xingjian has combined the Western theatrical techniques with those of traditional Chinese theatre to produce original contemporary Chinese plays. J. T. Shaw has also explained literary originality in the following term: "What genuinely moves the reader aesthetically and produces an independent artistic effect has artistic originality, whatever its debts."[11]

Gao Xingjian's experimentations have renewed the life of Chinese spoken drama and his position in modern Chinese theatre is assured. What he hopes for, however is no less than the establishment of a new, total theatre which would be a high development, combining performing arts as well as language and music. Gao has experimented with such ideas in his plays, but mostly by combining Western theories and techniques with contents that are completely Chinese. Given his innovation, courage and persistence, his dream may yet become a reality someday.

Notes

1 During the Cultural Revolution traditional plays were totally rejected. The professional theatre in China had almost ceased to function, apart from performances of a few "model" revolutionary dramas designed by Jiang Qin.

2 Gao Xingjian, "Guanyu Bi'an," Central Daily News, June 22, 1990.

3 J. T. Shaw, "Literary Indebtedness and Comparative Literary Studies," Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective, ed. Newton P. Stallknecht and Horst Frenz (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U P, 1961) 65.

4 Gao Xingjian's latest play Bi'an was first staged in Taiwan in June 1990 and was well received. See Central Daily News June 22, 1990.

5 Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964) 3-16.

6 Idid.

7 Ibid. 28.

8 Ibid. 28.

9 Ibid. 24.

10 J. T. Shaw, "Literary Indebtedness and Comparative Literary Studies," 65.

11 Ibid. 60.

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APPENDIX I

An Outline of Gao Xingjian's Life

Gao Xingjian was born in January 4 of 1940. According to Zhongguo wenxuejia cidian (A Dictionary of Chinese Literary Figures), he hails from Taizhou city, in Jiangsu province which is his ancestral home.[1] He was a student of French at the Beijing Foreign Language Institute from 1958 to 1962. He started creative writing since his second year at the university, and during his years there, he wrote many essays, poems, dramas, novels as well as screen plays, but none of them was published. All his early manuscripts were burned at the start of Cultural Revolution in 1966. Upon graduation, Gao worked as an interpreter and translator in China International Book Store for eight years. During the Cultural Revolution, he was first sent to a so-called cadre's school in 1969 and subsequently he was sent to live in a small county in Anhui province from 1971 to 1974, where he worked in the fields and later taught in a middle school.

Gao returned to Beijing in 1975. Since then he has worked as a translator and an interpreter for various organizations before becoming a professional writer for Beijing People's Art Troupe (Beijing renming yishu juyuan) in 1981, China's foremost performing arts company. Gao's first work was published in 1979; it was a prose piece, entitled "Bajin in Paris." In the same year he became a member of the Chinese Writers' Association, a national organization of China's noted writers. Following that, Gao Xingjian has published many novels, essays and plays. A list of his major publications is attached as Appendix II. The list was provided by the author himself in a letter he wrote to me dated March 5, 1987. A copy of this letter and its translation are also attached.

Even though Gao Xingjian has written more novels than dramas, his major achievements lie in play writing. His plays have always been controversial because of their unconventional devices and polemic themes. Gao is considered as a vanguard of Chinese theatrical reform. In a short statement he wrote in 1987, Gao has made the following remarks about his three major plays:

> My play The Alarm Signal was first performed by Beijing People's Art Troupe in 1982. That play presented characters in a real life situation together with their psychological activities such as recollection and imagination. During the performance some devices were also borrowed from traditional Chinese theatre. The performance produced strong theatrical effects and created a great sense of reality, and it caused a sensation throughout the country. More than ten performing troupes performed the play. Theatrical reform started in China since then.
>
> In 1983, not long after the première of my play The Bus-stop at Beijing People's Art Theatre, it was criticizied and had to be shelved during the anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign. Later, some well-known playwrights wrote supportive articles about the play. The debate has lasted till now, but no agreement has been reached.
>
> In 1984, I travelled along the Yangtze River observing and studying the natural environment and folk culture of those areas, and wrote a multi-phonic modern epic The Wildman afterwards. The play was performed by the People's Art Troupe in 1985 and employed various devices such as singing, dancing, mime, masks and narration in the performance. It once again created a great sensation through praises and criticisms.[2]

Gao Xingjian is also a painter. Exhibitions of his paintings were held in Beijing and Berlin in 1985. Within the last few years, he has been invited to visit France, Italy, West Germany, Britain, Austria and Denmark and his works have been discussed at several European universities. His play The Bus-stop was translated and published in Hungary and was performed in Yugoslavia. His last play On the Other Side of the River (Bi'an) was translated into Swedish and the Swedish Royal Theatre had planned to stage the play. Gao left China for Germany after the Tiananmen Incident on the fourth of June, 1989 and is now said to be living in France.

NOTES

1. It is the Chinese custom to provide the family origin rather than the actual birth place of a person in the biography or autobiography.

All the information provided here is taken from Zhongguo wenxuejia cidian (A dictionary of Chinese Literary Figures), Vol. IV. (Modern), (Sichuan Literary and Arts Press, 1985) 450-451; and Dangdai zhongguo zuojia bairenzhuan (One Hundred Autobiogrphies of Contemporary Chinese Writers), ed. Jieming, (Beijing: Qiushi Press, 1989) 271-274.

2. Gao Xingjian, "Xiaozhuan" (A Short Autobiography), Dangdai zhongguo zuojia biarenzhuan ed. Jieming, (Beijing: Qiushi Press, 1989) 272.

APPENDIX II

List of Gao Xingjian's Major Publications

Dramas

Jueduixinghao (The Alarm Signal), Shiyue, N0. 5, 1982.

Chezhan (The Bus-stop), Shiyue, No. 3, 1983.

Xiandai zhezixi (Modern Drama Sketches), Zhongshan, No. 4, 1983.

Dubai (Monologue), Xingjuben, No. 1, 1985.

Ye'ren (The Wildman), Shiyue, No. 2, 1985.

Gao Xingjian xijuji (A Collection of Gao Xingjian's Dramas), The Masses Press, 1985.

Bi'an (On the Other Side of River), Shiyue, No. 5, 1986.

Essays:

Xiandai xiaoshou jiqiao chutan (A preliminary Discussion of Contemporary Narrative Techniques), Guangzhou: Huacheng Press, 1981.

"Lun xijuguan" (A Discission on the Concept of Theatre), Xijujie, No. 1, 1983.

"Tan xiandai xiju shouduan" (Remarks on Modern Dramatic Devices), *Suibi*, No. 1, 1983.

"Tan juchangxing" (Remarks on Thearicality), *Suibi*, No. 2, 1983.

"Tan xijuxing" (Remarks on Histrionicism), *Suibi*, No. 3, 1983.

"Dongzuo yu guocheng" (Action and Process), *Suibi*, No. 4, 1983.

"Shijian yu kongjian" (Time and Space), *Suibi*, No. 5, 1983.

"Tan jiadingxing" (Remarks on Hypothesis), No. 6, 1983.

"Wo de xijuguan" (My Opinions about Theatre), *Xiju lunchong*, No. 4, 1984.

Juedui xinghao wutai yishu tansou (Discussions on the Stage Arts of **The Alarm Signal**), Beijing: China Drama Press, 1985.

"Yao shemeyiang de xiju" (What Kind of Theatre Do We Want), *Wenyi yanjiu*, No. 4, 1986.

Novels:

Pengyou (Friends), *Mangyuan*, No. 2, 1981.

Hanye de xingcheng (Stars on a Cold Night), *Shouhuo*, No. 1, 1981.

Yülei ji qita (Rain , Thunder and Others), *Chouxiaoya*, No. 7, 1982.

Lushang (On the Road), Renming wenxue, No. 9, 1982.

Ershiwu nian hou (After Twenty-five Years), Wenhui yuekan, No. 11, 1982.

Huahuan (The Wreath), Wenhui yuekan, No. 5, 1983.

Xiejiang he tade nüer (A Cobbler and His Daughter), Qingnian zuojia, No. 3, 1983.

Yuanenshi (Yuanen Temple), Haiyan, No. 8, 1983.

Muqin (Mother), Shiyue, No. 4, 1983.

Henabian (On the Other Side of the River), Zhongshan, No. 5, 1983.

Haishang (On the Sea), Chouxiaoya, No. 6, 1983.

Huadou (Flowering Bean), Renming wenxue, No. 6, 1984.

Wuti (No Title), Xiaoshuo yuebao, No. 1, 1985.

Gongyuan li (In the Park), Nanfang wenxue, No. 4, 1985.

Chehuo (Car Accident), Fujian wenxue, No. 5, 1985.

Wuru (Insult), Qingnian zuojia, No. 7, 1985.

Scenario:

Huadou (Flowering Bean), Chouxiaoya, No. 5, 1985.

APPENDIX III

The following is the translation of Gao Xingjian's letter that he wrote to me on March 5, 1987.

Dear Miss Li, Jianyi:

I received your letter through Qunzhong Press. The following is a list of my major publications:

Dramas:

Jueduixinghao (The Alarm Signal), Shiyue, N0. 5, 1982.

Chezhan (The Bus-stop), Shiyue, No. 3, 1983.

Xiandai zhezixi (Modern Drama Sketches), Zhongshan, No. 4, 1983.

Dubai (Monologue), Xingjuben, No. 1, 1985.

Ye'ren (The Wildman), Shiyue, No. 2, 1985.

Gao Xingjian xijuji (A Collection of Gao Xingjian's Dramas), The Masses Press, 1985.

Bi'an (On the Other Side of River), Shiyue, No. 5, 1986.

Essays:

Xiandai xiaoshou jiqiao chutan (A preliminary Discussion of Contemporary Narrative Techniques), Guangzhou: Huacheng Press, 1981.

"Lun xijuguan" (A Discission on the Concept of Theatre), Xijujie, No. 1, 1983.

"Tan xiandai xiju shouduan" (Remarks on Modern Dramatic Devices), Suibi, No. 1, 1983.

"Tan juchangxing" (Remarks on Thearicality), Suibi, No. 2, 1983.

"Tan xijuxing" (Remarks on Histrionicism), Suibi, No. 3, 1983.

"Dongzuo yu guocheng" (Action and Process), Suibi, No. 4, 1983.

"Shijian yu kongjian" (Time and Space), Suibi, No. 5, 1983.

"Tan jiadingxing" (Remarks on Hypothesis), No. 6, 1983.

"Wo de xijuguan" (My Opinions about Theatre), Xiju lunchong, No. 4, 1984.

Juedui xinghao wutai yishu tansou (Discussions on the Stage Arts of **The Alarm Signal**), Beijing: China Drama Press, 1985.

"Yao shemeyiang de xiju" (What Kind of Theatre Do We Want), Wenyi yanjiu, No. 4, 1986.

Novels:

Pengyou (Friends), Mangyuan, No. 2, 1981.

Hanye de xingcheng (Stars on a Cold Night), Shouhuo, No. 1, 1981.

Yü, lei ji qita (Rain, Thunder and Others), Chouxiaoya, No. 7, 1982.

Lushang (On the Road), Renming wenxue, No. 9, 1982.

Ershiwu nian-hou (After Twenty-five Years), Wenhui yuekan, No. 11, 1982.

Huahuan (The Wreath), Wenhui yuekan, No. 5, 1983.

Xiejiang he tade nüer (A Cobbler and His Daughter), Qingnian zuojia, No. 3, 1983.

Yuan'enshi (Yuan'en Temple), Haiyan, No. 8, 1983.

Muqin (Mother), Shiyue, No. 4, 1983.

Henabian (On the Other Side of the River), Zhongshan, No. 5, 1983.

Haishang (On the Sea), Chouxiaoya, No. 6, 1983.

Huadou (Flowering Bean), Renming wenxue, No. 6, 1984.

Wuti (No Title), Xiaoshuo yuebao, No. 1, 1985.

Gongyuan li (In the Park), Nanfang wenxue, No. 4, 1985.

Chehuo (Car Accident), Fujian wenxue, No. 5, 1985.

Wuru (Insult), Qingnian zuojia, No. 7, 1985.

Scenario:

Huadou (Flowering Bean), Chouxiaoya, No. 5, 1985.

I agreed with you that the waiting in The Bus-stop and the waiting in Waiting for Godot are different. Whereas the former is a comedy, the latter is a tragedy. Certainly, the essence of The Bus-stop is tragic, but it is presented in a comic way. I have studied plays of the Theatre of the Absurd and translated Ionesco's The Bald Prima Donna. Among all the Absurdists, I appreciate Jean Genet most. He undertsood the essence of theatre better than the others. The other ones reformed only dramatic literature, but not drama itself. I hope all I have writen are dramas to be performed rather than to be read. Please see my essays for further details about my opinions on theatre.

For future correspondence, you can write to me at Beijing Renming Yishu Jüyuan.

Best wishes!

Gao Xingjian
March 5, 1987.

P.S.
Criticism and discussions of my plays are found in various journals and papers, especially the 1984 and 1985 issues of Xijubao (Drama Weekly) and Wenyibao (Literary Gazette).

李建一兄、以列出给你高行健所有未发表的作品。已发表的一些主要作品目录开列如下：

剧作《绝对信号》 十月 1982.No.5（北京人艺1982年上演）

车站 十月 1983 No.3（北京人艺1983年上演）

现代折子戏 钟山 1983 No.4

独白 新剧本 1985 No.1

野人 十月 1985 No.2.（北京人艺1985年上演）

《高行健戏剧集》 群众出版社 1985年6月（包括 [illegible]
〔尚出版之问题剧〕

彼岸 十月 1986年No.5

论文集《〈绝对信号〉的艺术探索》 中国戏剧出版社 1985年5月

《戏剧界》 1983.No.1

论文《论戏剧观》 戏剧论丛 1984.No.4

《我的戏剧观》 随笔 1983 No.1

谈现代戏剧手段 〃 〃 2

谈剧场性 〃 〃 3

谈戏剧性 〃 〃 4

动作与过程 〃 〃 5

时间与空间 〃 〃 6

谈假定性 1986 No.4

文艺研究

要什么样的戏剧 北京出版社 1984年5月

《现代小说技巧初探》 1981 No.2

中篇小说《有只鸽子叫红唇儿》 收获 1982 No.7

短篇小说 朋友 丑小鸭 1982.No.9

雨雪及其他 人民文学 1982.No.11

路上 文汇月刊 1983.No.5

二十五年后 文汇月刊 1983 No.3

花环 青年作家 1983.No.8

鞋匠和他的女儿 海燕 1983.No.4

圆恩寺 十月 1983 No.5

母亲

河那边 钟山

路上	丑小鸭	1983年	No.6
花豆	人民文学	1984年	No.9
母亲	小说周报	1985年	No.1
公园里	南方文学	1985年	No.4
车祸	福建文学	1985年	No.5
侮辱	青年作家	1986年	No.7

论著《现代小说技巧初探》花城出版社 1981年9月

电影文学《花豆》 丑小鸭 1985年 Nos. 1–2 连载。

我的实验戏剧"车站"中的笑和《彼岸》剧的笑是二种的，"车站"中幸存的是悲剧似的[illegible]，前者是喜剧，后者是悲剧，~~尤其~~ 我研究的是近代的闹剧。至于[illegible]又是理论喜剧。我尤喜欢[illegible]的《[illegible]》。[illegible] ~~[illegible]~~ Jean Genet 也以别人[illegible]，[illegible]，[illegible]剧作[illegible]，[illegible]别的几位[illegible]，[illegible]一种[illegible]作戏的闹剧。[illegible]，[illegible]详见我的一些文章。

来信可寄北京人民艺术剧院。

祝你成功！

高行健
1987.5.5.

对我的戏的评论有数百篇剧评，特别是1984年和1985年的《戏剧报》和《文艺报》